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UKRAINE: People barred entry on religious grounds now free to appeal

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In a new move, the SBU security police has told Forum 18 News Service that people barred entry by other CIS countries – including Russia – on religious and other grounds can now appeal against any visa bar to Ukraine. Appeals can be made either to the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry or the SBU, Forum 18 was told. The move follows the ending of an entry ban against Japanese Buddhist monk Junsei Teresawa. The SBU refused to tell Forum 18 why Teresawa had originally been denied entry, but insisted it was not for religious reasons and denied that there is a religious category for issuing entry bans. Not every religious figure banned from entry by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan has been barred from Ukraine and Latvian-based Pastor Aleksei Ledyayev - barred by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan – is now in Ukraine. One of the most prominent recent deportees from Russia was Catholic Bishop Jerzy Mazur, a Polish citizen, but the SBU told Forum 18 that "no-one with the surname Mazur is on the Ukrainian entry ban list".

Japanese Buddhist monk and teacher Junsei Teresawa has had his ban on entry to Ukraine removed. He was earlier this month deported back to Poland after his valid Ukrainian visa was summarily cancelled on 4 May on SBU security police orders (see F18News 5 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=556). The monk received a six-month multi-entry visa at the Ukrainian consulate in the Polish capital Warsaw on 27 May, members of the Buddhist Nipponzan Myohoji Order told Forum 18 News Service from Kiev the same day.

In a new move, SBU spokesperson Marina Ostapenko told Forum 18 that those barred by other CIS countries – including Russia – on religious and other grounds can challenge their visa bar to Ukraine by appealing to the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry or the SBU. "Junsei Teresawa had his visa ban revoked on 13 May after he appealed to President Viktor Yushchenko," she told Forum 18 on 25 May.

In Warsaw, Teresawa handed an appeal against the entry denial to visiting President Yushchenko and Buddhists in Ukraine launched vigorous protests, mounting a vigil outside the SBU headquarters in Kiev. Early on 20 May, SBU Colonel Vladimir Anufrienko emerged from the building to tell the protesters that the entry bar had been lifted and that this had been communicated to all border posts. However, it took longer for the Foreign Ministry to notify Ukrainian consular posts. Teresawa is known for his strong condemnation of Russia's actions in Chechnya and was barred in 2000 from entry to Russia. He wanted to visit Buddhist religious communities in Ukraine at their invitation.

Ostapenko refused to tell Forum 18 why Teresawa had originally been denied entry, saying this was a secret, but insisted it was not for religious reasons. She denied that there is a religious category for issuing entry bans. She also refused to say if Teresawa had been denied entry because the Russian authorities had placed him on an entry ban list. "His case was among a number reviewed by a commission," she reported. "Several decisions were changed, several remained unchanged."

Ostapenko explained to Forum 18 that if Russia or any other CIS state bars entry to an individual on any grounds, it then sends notification of that entry ban to other CIS states in accordance with a 2002 agreement. Individual states can choose to follow the lead of other states or not. She denied that a centralised CIS entry ban list exists. "Just because an individual is listed as banned for entry elsewhere doesn't mean we automatically list them as banned," she told Forum 18. "What's more, if an individual has not committed a crime in Ukraine and is not linked to terrorism, they can successfully challenge any denial of entry."

A number of Protestant and Catholic clergy, as well as Muslims and Buddhists, have been expelled from Russia and given an entry ban in recent years. There is mutual sharing of information over individuals banned from entry between Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, but not every religious figure banned from entry by Russia has been barred from Ukraine. Latvian-based pastor and head of the "neo-Pentecostal" New Generation Church Aleksei Ledyayev – indefinitely barred from Russia in 2002 – has also been barred separately by Belarus and Kazakhstan. However, he has freely visited Ukraine on several recent occasions and is currently there, his church office told Forum 18 from the Latvian capital Riga on 27 May.

One of the most prominent deportees from Russia was Bishop Jerzy Mazur, a Polish citizen who headed the Catholic diocese of western Siberia based in Irkutsk, who was expelled in 2002. However, Ostapenko told Forum 18 that "no-one with the surname

Mazur is on the Ukrainian entry ban list". Bishop Mazur told Forum 18 on 27 May that although he has not tried to visit Ukraine since his expulsion from Russia, he does not believe he is barred. However, he says those listed as banned for entry by the Russian authorities are denied entry to Kazakhstan and Belarus. Currently, the visa situation of foreign Catholic clergy in Russia is best described as mixed (see F18News 23 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=461).

Among other recent deportees from Russia is Bishop Siegfried Springer, head of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in European Russia, who was deported back to Germany in April after his visa was annulled (see F18News 18 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=545). Also, two Salvation Army officers were denied entry to Russia, but Bishop Springer was allowed to make a brief visit in May (see F18News 4 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=555). Forum 18 has been unable to discover if Bishop Springer has also been placed on Ukraine's visa ban list.

The Ukrainian entry ban on Fr Nicolae Asargiu, a Ukrainian-born Moldovan citizen and priest of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, expired in 2003, the Church's leader Metropolitan Petru Paduraru told Forum 18 from the Moldovan capital Chisinau on 24 May. Fr Asargiu was working as a Bessarabian priest in his home village in Odessa region. This annoyed the local authorities and Orthodox clergy loyal to the rival Ukrainian branch of the Moscow Patriarchate, so he was given a five-year ban in 1998. The Bessarabian Church is part of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

"He was the only one of our priests who was denied entry to Ukraine, but other priests were banned from working in individual villages during the rule of President Leonid Kuchma," Metropolitan Petru told Forum 18. He said Fr Asargiu has resumed travelling to serve Romanian-speaking congregations in border regions of Ukraine, but Ukrainian border guards still question him as to why he travels there so frequently.

Metropolitan Petru said although harassment of Bessarabian Orthodox congregations has eased since Yushchenko became president, such congregations still face intermittent threats and petty harassment from local people who, he alleged, are "stirred up by the Russian Orthodox Church".

For a personal commentary by Professor Myroslav Marynovych of the Ukrainian Catholic University, on the abolition by Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, see F18News 16 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=526. Professor Marynovych argues that without democratic change, it is unlikely that religious communities will escape government efforts to control them.

A printer-friendly map of Ukraine is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=ukrain>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY