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BELARUS: False dawn for Minsk charismatic church

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Despite a 15 September promise "as an officer" from Belarus' deputy interior minister General Viktor Filistovich that he would help resolve the predicament of the embattled New Life Church at a further meeting with top religious affairs officials, the deadlock for the Minsk-based charismatic congregation has not been broken. Filistovich failed to appear for a 19 September meeting and junior officials simply repeated earlier demands that the church cannot retain use of a cow-shed it bought in 2002 which it has converted into a church. "Now state officials have no moral right to tell us that we have not exhausted all peaceful methods of resolving our problems," Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko commented. Church administrator Vasily Yurevich told Forum 18 News Service that the congregation is currently praying about what to do next. The congregation has been denied re-registration, rendering all its worship services illegal, and church leaders have been fined.

A 15 September surprise meeting between representatives of the embattled Minsk-based New Life Church and a top-level Interior Ministry official has failed to break the deadlock in the church's predicament, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "Now state officials have no moral right to tell us that we have not exhausted all peaceful methods of resolving our problems," New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko commented on the church's website in the wake of the meeting. Speaking to Forum 18 on 20 September, church administrator Vasily Yurevich said that the congregation is currently praying about what to do next.

New Life had invited Minsk city executive committee chairman Mikhail Pavlov to explain at its 4 September Sunday service why he and his colleagues took their 17 August decision to confiscate the land beneath the church's building, a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002 (see F18News 1 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=640). When Pavlov failed to appear, the entire congregation vowed to go to his office at 4pm on Thursday 15 September, in what Pastor Goncharenko described as "not a demonstration – the church will simply be asking to be received by the mayor".

On 14 September, however, Pastor Goncharenko was invited to a midday meeting with the assistant head of Minsk city police, Colonel Anatoli Naidenko. Accompanied by New Life's administrator Vasily Yurevich and lawyer Sergei Lukanin, the church's website reported that the colonel roughly threatened the three with arrest should members of the church gather near the Minsk city executive building as planned on 15 September, adding that state television had already been ordered to report such events "with appropriate commentary". After Naidenko left the room, the website added, police officers filmed his assistant Yevgeni Poluden repeating the warning – this time politely.

At 10am on 15 September, the three church representatives were unexpectedly called back to Minsk city police department and told that their problem would have to be resolved at a higher level. There followed a one-and-a-half-hour meeting with deputy interior minister General Viktor Filistovich, who reportedly "gave his word as an officer" that he would help resolve the church's predicament positively at a further meeting with top religious affairs officials on Monday 19 September. According to the church's subsequent report, General Filistovich stated that he was personally responsible for public order in Belarus and considered "such a conflict between the state and religious believers to be against the republic's interests".

As a result of this meeting, New Life decided not to go to Mayor Pavlov's office on 15 September. A church report notes that seven busloads of riot police guarded the square outside his building on that day.

Following the promised meeting on 19 September, Yurevich told Forum 18 that General Filistovich had not in fact participated, and that junior rather than senior religious affairs officials had simply reiterated the same demands – that the church should re-register at a new legal address and accept that its cowshed would be bought by the state – that had inspired the original deadlock. "They aren't empowered to take any decisions," he remarked. "It was just for show."

Asked by Forum 18 on 21 September how New Life's situation could now be resolved, Aleksandr Kalinov - who represented the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs at the 19 September meeting – indeed insisted that the only solution was for the church to re-register at a new address, since, as other state representatives have repeatedly explained to Forum 18 (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516), New Life may not use its building for worship under Belarusian law as it is technically a cowshed. When Forum 18 pointed out that the possession of an alternative legal address would not give the congregation the right to worship there under the 2002 religion law and that the essence of the problem appeared to be

the Minsk authorities' refusal to grant the church the permission to meet at venues in the city which is now required under the same law, Kalinov maintained that he had yet to see any evidence that this was the case.

Since no new proposals were made at the 19 September meeting, New Life lawyer Sergei Lukanin concludes that General Filistovich's promise to resolve the church's situation was made "simply to avoid at all costs 'social unrest' while the president was in America". In his address to the United Nations in New York on 16 September, Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko indeed stressed that "there are no conflicts in my country. Different nations and ethnicities co-exist peacefully, each practising their own religion and way of life."

New Life Church has still not been approached by any state department with an offer to purchase its disused cowshed, Yurevich told Forum 18 on 20 September, even though preparations for this were scheduled to take place by 1 September 2005.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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

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