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BELARUS: Police, officials and soldiers disrupt church family holiday

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Officials from Smorgon District Executive Committee and the local departments for Hygiene, Minors and Emergency Situations, as well as soldiers and police, have disrupted a private holiday of families from a number of Minsk charismatic churches, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. After harassing the camp from the start of the holiday, officials claimed on the second day of the camp that it breached health and safety rules and soldiers loaded families onto an inadequate bus, for them to be deported back to Minsk under police escort. As the camp – which was not an official church event – was in the grounds of a house owned by church members, "we didn't think we had to get permission for it," Andrei Frolikhin of Word of Faith Church told Forum 18. State officials in Minsk were reportedly also involved. Church members are complaining about the disruption to their holiday, noting "that the majority of the children and parents are believers of various Protestant churches is no legal basis for interference." The authorities have not answered any questions from Forum 18 about their disruption of the private holiday.

A group of families from a number of Minsk charismatic churches camping in the grounds of a private house near the village of Tizhishki, in Smorgon district (Grodno [Hrodna] region) of north-western Belarus, have had their private holiday disrupted by the authorities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. They were deported back to the Belarusian capital by local state representatives on 9 August, the third day of their holiday.

The holiday was not an official church event, but a private camp consisting of approximately 60 parents, children and friends, the administrator of one of the churches involved, Word of Faith, stressed to Forum 18 on 14 August. Since it was located on grounds attached to a house privately owned by church members, said Andrei Frolikhin, "we didn't think we had to get permission for it."

A local police officer arrived soon after tents were pitched on the evening of 7 August, Frolikhin told Forum 18. Leading officials from Smorgon District Executive Committee and the local departments for Hygiene, Minors and Emergency Situations visited throughout the day on 8 August. Claiming the camp to be in violation of health and safety norms, the state representatives took the names of participants, Frolikhin said, and announced that they would have to leave. On the morning of 9 August, continued Frolikhin, approximately ten soldiers loaded both campers and equipment onto a bus "like criminals", and the group was driven the approximately 75 kilometres (48 miles) back to the capital Minsk under police escort.

Forum 18's enquiries about the incident were directed by a receptionist to the vice-chairwoman of Smorgon District Executive Committee, Svetlana Shmyga, on 16 August. However, her telephone went unanswered both on that day and 17 August.

There were far too few seats for passengers and no luggage compartment on the bus provided by the authorities for the deportation, Andrei Frolikhin told Forum 18, remarking that this revealed the state representatives' lack of genuine concern about the children's welfare. While he thought that the camp could have been criticised in some respects – "we didn't have a registered fire extinguisher, for example" – Word of Faith's administrator emphasised that its participants have yet to be given any written explanation for the disruption, or charged with any violation. "We still don't know the official reasons for it."

A complaint to be sent to officials in both Grodno region and Minsk, from church members involved in the incident, was seen by Forum 18 on 16 August. It maintains that, while participants were being driven out of Smorgon District, officials in Minsk – including the city's senior religious affairs official, Alla Ryabitseva – telephoned those parents who had remained in the Belarusian capital. The officials reportedly asked the parents to what organisation they had given charge of their children and if they knew where they were, in addition to informing them where the children would be dropped off on their imminent return to Minsk. "The fact that the majority of the children and parents are believers of various Protestant churches," the complaint argues, "is no legal basis for interference by the Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs of Minsk City Executive Committee."

Alla Ryabitseva's telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 rang on 17 August. Contacted by Forum 18 on 24 July about another matter, fellow Minsk religious affairs official Yelena Radchenko said that she could not answer any questions without Ryabitseva's authorisation: "We have a certain procedure here" (see F18News 28 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=819).

The Belarusian state actively seeks to restrict children's involvement in Protestant churches, Forum 18 has found (see F18News 8 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=824). The involvement of Jewish children in a Jewish religious festival has also been attacked (see F18News 13 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=798).

Participants in the disrupted camp all belong to charismatic churches of the Belarusian Full Gospel Association. Sergei Lukanin, a member of and lawyer for the association's largest congregation, New Life Church in Minsk, told Forum 18 on 16 August that there have been no further developments to date in the state's legal battle to confiscate that church's worship building. With the church's legal defence options now dwindling, he believes that the congregation could lose the premises – the only ones available to it – in a matter of weeks (see F18News 28 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=819).

On 4 August New Life's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, received notice that he has been given a fine of 930,000 Belarusian roubles (2,806 Norwegian kroner, 349 Euros or 449 US Dollars), for conducting a worship service without state permission on Sunday 4 June. This sum is considerably higher than two fines previously imposed on Pastor Goncharenko for leading church services (see F18News 23 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=530 and 19 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=565).

Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 that Pastor Goncharenko has not yet paid the latest fine, but will do so: "He has no choice – if he doesn't, court bailiffs will come to his home and impound his personal property."

New Life's administrator, Vasily Yurevich, has also been fined three times for organising unapproved worship, on the last occasion 3,825,000 Belarusian roubles (11,645 Norwegian Kroner, 1,488 Euros or 1,780 US Dollars) (see F18News 25 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676). (END)

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

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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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