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RUSSIA: Pentecostal teacher "forced to resign" after raid on house church

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

Chelyabinsk region's public prosecutor has just opened an investigation into a late December raid on a Pentecostal service at a private house, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The disruption of Word of God Church's Christmas service in the town of Argayash involved local police and district officials from the Emergencies and Youth departments. According to the church, one of its members was subsequently forced to resign from her kindergarten teaching post or else face "fabricated" charges of maltreating children under the Criminal Code. Word of God's parent church in Chelyabinsk city believes that the Argayash police and officials are the ones who have violated the Criminal Code, however, by impeding their members' religious freedom and acting without proper authorisation. While remarking to Forum 18 that the attack on his church "feels like the 1930s", Pastor Sergei Bortsov stressed that the situation in Argayash is unusual for Chelyabinsk region as a whole. In recent years similar incidents have been reported in Chelyabinsk city, Ivanovo, Udmurtia and Sakhalin, with varying state responses.

Chelyabinsk region's public prosecutor has opened an investigation into state representatives' disruption of Pentecostal worship at a private house late last year, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. This follows a February 2007 complaint from Word of God Pentecostal Church in Chelyabinsk (approximately 1,700km [1,050 miles] east of Moscow) that the state's action against its congregation in the town of Argayash (Chelyabinsk region) violated Articles 148 and 286 of the Criminal Code (impeding the right to freedom of conscience and exceeding official powers). On 14 February, Pastor Sergei Bortsov of Word of God Pentecostal Church in Argayash received a copy of a letter from the regional public prosecutor instructing Argayash district's public prosecutor to examine the case.

Instead of apologising in the wake of the raid, Argayash state representatives have also forced one of the congregation to resign from her kindergarten teaching post, Forum 18 has been told. "It feels like the 1930s!" Pastor Bortsov remarked to Forum 18 from Argayash on 14 February.

The 30-strong congregation was meeting for worship at Pastor Bortsov's home at 11am on Sunday 24 December 2006, when local police and officials from the Emergencies and Youth departments arrived and demanded documents relating to the property and church, including ownership rights to the house and state permission for the prayer house under construction alongside. While police Colonel Ramil Galilullin later told regional newspaper "Chelyabinsky Rabochy" that he and his colleagues had neither entered the room where worship was taking place nor disrupted it, Pastor Bortsov pointed out to Forum 18 that the check-up resulted in church leaders being absent from the service for some 90 minutes. "If they were to summon an Orthodox priest for questioning during a liturgy, wouldn't that mean that worship was being disrupted?"

Pastor Bortsov told Forum 18 that he has also yet to be presented with documentation validating the check-up. While the district administration has cited unspecified complaints about children attending the Pentecostals' services without parental consent, he said, "that is a lie." Legally, he added, fire inspectors would be entitled to check up on a private house in this way if they presented the necessary warrant, "but they didn't have one."

Neither Argayash head of administration Istafil Valishin nor Anna Minayeva of the district's youth department, who took part in the check-up, was available for comment when Forum 18 rang repeatedly on 16 and 19 February.

Quoted by "Chelyabinsky Rabochy" on 26 January, police Colonel Galilullin maintained that the reason for the check-up was a complaint by local citizens that children attended the Pentecostal church without parental permission. Received on 22 December, the complaint had to be addressed within three days in accordance with the law, he explained, and since the church met only on Sundays and Wednesdays, "there was no other opportunity - we checked fire safety precautions while we were at it."

Pastor Bortsov told Forum 18 that he was fined 500 roubles [14 Euros, 117 Norwegian Kroner or 19 US Dollars] due to incorrect use of a traditional Russian stove and sauna and defective electrical wiring, "which we paid as we didn't want to make an issue out of it." According to the pastor's 26 December 2006 statement published by the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, neither police nor emergency department representatives inspected his house or stipulated what improvements in fire safety should

be made. He also pointed out that the majority of houses in Argayash are of the same, traditional wooden type with similar defects.

Pastor Bortsov also told Forum 18 how in January, a few weeks after the raid, a member of the congregation who works as a kindergarten teacher was forced to hand in her notice or else face charges under Article 156 of the Criminal Code (maltreatment of children), prosecution for which may result in up to three years' imprisonment. While the allegations are "fabricated", he insisted, the teacher concerned is still without work.

"Chelyabinsky Rabochy" cites complaints from several parents maintaining that their children return from the kindergarten upset, nervous and afraid to sleep in the dark or to kill insects, as well as mentioning "the name of God, which is completely absent in family conversations." The teacher who resigned, the newspaper maintains, treated children roughly – slapping them and twisting their arms – and this led to the director of the kindergarten asking her to leave. The 26 January article is accompanied by an extract from the Large Soviet Encyclopaedia, which maintains: "Pentecostals are a Christian sect. Their doctrine comes from the gospel myth about 'the descent of the holy spirit on the apostles' on the fiftieth day after Easter – pentecost."

Pastor Bortsov dismissed the newspaper allegations about the church member's behaviour at the kindergarten as "half made up to discredit the church, half the product of children's imaginations." He also stressed to Forum 18 that the Argayash church's situation is unusual for Chelyabinsk region as a whole, which he described as "tolerant".

While reported incidents of this type are rare in Russia, it was in Chelyabinsk city that state representatives disrupted a Jehovah's Witness worship meeting in 2000. This led to a recent ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg obliging the Russian government to pay the Jehovah's Witnesses compensation of 90,544 Euros [3,107,094 Russian roubles, 754,061 Norwegian Kroner or 116,998 US Dollars] (see F18News 17 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=900).

In April 2004 a private firm on the Pacific island of Sakhalin sacked three Jehovah's Witnesses claiming that their religious affiliation might represent a threat to the security of the company (see F18News 4 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=312).

In other similar recent cases, 20 masked special and plain-clothes police raided a Pentecostal church in Udmurtia (approximately 1,100km [690 miles] east of Moscow) on 14 April 2005 (see F18News 22 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=547). On 14 May 2006 police detained members of Resurrection Baptist Church as they distributed copies of the New Testament during an evangelisation event at a rented cinema in Ivanovo (approximately 300km [188 miles] north-east of Moscow, see F18News 7 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=794).

Following high-level complaints in both cases, the state authorities have gone a short way towards making amends for their actions. In a 17 May 2005 response to a query from the US-based Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Udmurtia's Interior Minister Nikolai Arzamatsev maintained that the April raid was occasioned by a murder inquiry. Admitting, however, that police committed "a series of violations of a procedural nature" during that incident, he added that those responsible "have been disciplined".

In a 14 July 2006 letter to Yuri Sipko, the head of Russia's main Baptist Union, regional government vice-chairman Sergei Pakhomov similarly confirmed that state representatives committed procedural violations during the evangelisation event in Ivanovo. (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

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

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