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BELARUS: Pentecostals raided at Pentecost

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

Ten state officials raided the Pentecost service of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church in the capital Minsk yesterday (27 May). Pastor Antoni Bokun was arrested, held overnight at a police station and fined 20 times the minimum monthly wage today (28 May) for holding an "unsanctioned mass meeting", Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The church – which has state registration – has been refused permission to rent premises for public worship, so has to meet in a private home. Local lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 that Pastor Bokun told the court he had broken the law only because it went against the law of God. Fellow church member Jaroslaw Lukasik, a Polish citizen married to a Belarusian, who faces deportation in early June, was also held for several hours. Although he did not preach at the service, he faces administrative charges on accusations of conducting unauthorised religious activity as a foreign citizen and hence violating laws on the presence of foreign citizens in Belarus.

After police held him overnight, a court in the capital Minsk has today (28 May) handed down a large fine to Antoni Bokun, pastor of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The prosecution follows a police raid on the 100-strong congregation's Pentecost service yesterday (27 May), held at his home because the authorities refuse to allow the church to rent a building for worship.

Pastor Bokun was detained following the Sunday service and spent the night in custody at Minsk's Central District Police Station. On 28 May Minsk's Central District Court fined him 20 times the minimum monthly wage, or 620,000 Belarusian roubles (1,740 Norwegian kroner, 215 Euros or 290 US Dollars), for holding an "unapproved mass meeting".

Local lawyer Sergei Lukanin was present with approximately 100 other supporters at the hearing. He told Forum 18 that Pastor Bokun told the court he had broken the law only because it went against the law of God. He was prosecuted under Article 23.34 of the Administrative Violations Code, which punishes violation of regulations for holding demonstrations or other mass events with a fine of up to 30 times the minimum wage or 25 days' imprisonment. A revised version of the Administrative Violations Code was approved on 31 December 2006 and came into force on 1 March 2007.

On the morning of 28 May, a police spokesman at Minsk's Central District Police Station confirmed Bokun's detention there to Forum 18. "So what?" he remarked. Asked what charges Bokun faced, the spokesman replied, "for holding an unapproved meeting". However, he insisted that he was unaware what type of meeting it was: "How should I know?"

Under the 2003 Demonstrations Law, all public events require the advance permission of the local state authorities. Under the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, religious events outside designated places of worship – even in the home – may take place only after a corresponding decision by the local authorities.

Lukanin, the lawyer, told Forum 18 on 27 May that he was given access to Pastor Bokun, "but not immediately, and we had to insist." While Pastor Bokun signed the protocol drawn up against him, he said, he explained that John the Baptist Pentecostal Church – which holds state registration – meets at his home without official permission only because it has been refused state permission to rent other premises: "They had no choice".

Ten state representatives – two in police uniform and eight in plain clothes – carried out the raid, Jaroslaw Lukasik, who assists at John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, told Forum 18 after himself being detained for several hours at Central District Police Station on 27 May. Two young men in plain clothes – whom he presumed to be KGB secret police – were present from the start of the 11am service, he said. Neither they nor the eight who arrived during guest preacher Bishop Sergei Tsvor's sermon identified themselves, he added. The state representatives began filming while Bishop Tsvor was preaching and called those present out into a neighbouring yard after worship had finished, he said. A truck of OMON riot police was also headed for the house church, added Lukasik, but by the time it arrived both he and Pastor Bokun were already being escorted to the police station.

Lukasik believes the purpose of the raid was to prosecute him further after his public refutation of a 8 May order under which he must return to his native Poland by 8 June (see F18News 17 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=958).

While he witnessed and prayed at the Pentecost service, Lukasik maintained, there was "no basis" for the protocol police drew up

against him since Bishop Tsvor had preached in his place. "So I refused to sign it." Nevertheless he was accused of conducting unauthorised religious activity as a foreign citizen and hence violating laws on the presence of foreign citizens in Belarus. Lukasik is due to go before an administrative commission this coming Wednesday (30 May). Once two Polish diplomats were given access to him towards the end of his Sunday afternoon detention, he told Forum 18, police officers explained that he faces a fine of up to 20 times the minimum wage or immediate deportation.

The authorities in Belarus maintain tight controls on the religious activity of foreign citizens. A Polish Catholic priest narrowly escaped prosecution after he celebrated Mass without state permission while passing through Minsk last September (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849). Foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities of various confessions are increasingly being barred (see F18News 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856).

This is the first time John the Baptist Pentecostal Church has been raided. In late 2006 a local policeman and a state representative in plain clothes inspected the empty premises – the basement of a free-standing house near the edge of Minsk - but there have been no repercussions until now.

Tsvor, the Pentecostal Union's bishop for Minsk and Minsk Region, was similarly threatened with charges for unsanctioned worship in March 2006. However, he was spared punishment following the expiry of the legal deadline for his prosecution (see F18News 13 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=743). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

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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