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BULGARIA: Protestant Chaplaincy Association gains legal status

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

A Protestant group, the Bulgarian Chaplaincy Association, has gained legal status. But it remains unclear how armed forces chaplaincy work will be conducted. Lieutenant-Colonel Sevastian Dobrev of the Defence Ministry told Forum 18 News Service that no faith is currently can currently conduct this activity, in a hangover from Communist times, "but military personnel are perfectly free to attend religious events outside their barracks." Metropolitan Grigory of the Orthodox Church told Forum 18 that, unofficially, Orthodox priests are invited to conduct liturgies on holy days and even to build churches in barracks. He would welcome a law establishing a military chaplaincy service, adding that contacts with Catholics, Protestants and Muslims had begun about this. But a Justice Ministry official attempted to interfere with the founding of the Chaplaincy Association, and Lt.-Col. Dobrev stated that the state Religious Affairs Directorate will decide who will take part in chaplaincy work. "They have a list of which faiths are recognised and which are banned."

Despite the initial failure of the Bulgarian Chaplaincy Association to gain legal status in a court in the south-eastern town of Yambol, the Sofia Municipal Court granted it legal status on 23 February. "At least we are legal now, but the current law prohibits religious activities in the army or police," Association board member Dony Donev told Forum 18 News Service on 23 February. The Association was established by a group of Protestant churches last August. "We wanted to have a legal foundation through which to put pressure on the government to change that," Donev said.

The Chaplaincy Association's intention is to encompass chaplaincy work in Bulgarian public institutions, such as prisons, hospitals and airports, but it is at first concentrating on military chaplaincy work. It complains that "men and women from various religious affiliations with a compassionate desire to conduct chaplaincy ministry are strictly prohibited from ministering at any level within the Bulgarian Armed Forces and are severely restricted from doing so in other social settings as well."

Lieutenant-Colonel Sevastian Dobrev, of the Defence Ministry's Public Relations Department, who is responsible for relations with Metropolitan Grigory (Stefanov) of Veliko Turnovo, the Orthodox Church representative to the Ministry, stated that no faith is currently allowed to conduct any activity on military premises. "Our Constitution and our military law do not allow this," he told Forum 18 from Sofia on 23 February. "This goes back to the Communist era. But military personnel are perfectly free to attend religious events outside their barracks in their free time."

But despite Lt.-Col Dobrev's statement, Metropolitan Grigory said that, even without a law authorising it, military commanders invite Orthodox priests to conduct liturgies on holy days and even to build churches in barracks. "Links with the army are good, but this is not official," he told Forum 18 from Veliko Turnovo on 23 February. "With the blessing of the General Staff we are accepted by commanders - they are quite good about this. I'm sure the Orthodox are invited everywhere."

He pointed out that a church has been built at the Atia barracks near Sozopol on the Black Sea coast, while in his diocese in northern Bulgaria a church is being built in the centre of the National Military University "Vassil Levski" in Veliko Turnovo. "Commanders invite us or soldiers just find a way to build these churches," Metropolitan Grigory said. He denied that the Orthodox Church is able to conduct activity within barracks that is denied to other faiths.

Metropolitan Grigory also told Forum 18 he would welcome a law introducing a military chaplaincy service officially, adding that his Church had already begun ecumenical and interfaith contacts with Catholics, Protestants and Muslims about how such a chaplaincy might work.

Now that the Chaplaincy Association has gained legal status, it remains unclear what activities the Association will be able to undertake. Lt.-Col. Dobrev told Forum 18 that discussions are already underway within the Defence Ministry about the possibility of introducing a chaplaincy service, especially in the light of the change taking place on 1 January next year, when the armed forces move from being based on national service conscripts to having only professional soldiers, sailors and airman. "We'll try to organise the first steps for a chaplaincy system," he told Forum 18. "We have enough knowledge of the experience of other NATO countries." But he insisted that any such change will have to be initiated by politicians not the Defence Ministry, as such a change will require a law in Parliament.

Pastor Donev, who is a minister of the Pentecostal Church of God, told Forum 18 that he and fellow pastors have been inspired to create a chaplaincy service for the past five years. He said that the Chaplaincy Association - representing about 120 Protestant pastors and individuals mainly affiliated with the Church of God and Assemblies of God, but also including Baptists and Lutherans - was founded at a meeting in Yambol on 19 August 2006. The Association pledged to work for "regular paid chaplaincy service in the Bulgarian army, Ministry of Internal Affairs, jail and prison systems, Bulgarian seaports and airports, and the healthcare system". It insisted that all faiths should have equal access to chaplaincy ministry.

However, after reading about the founding of the Association in a Protestant newspaper, Vasil Marinov, an official of the Justice Ministry in charge of meeting the religious needs of prisoners, telephoned Donev on 5 September and summoned him to his office in the capital Sofia that same day.

"Marinov summoned me by telephone, not in writing, and the meeting was in his office after hours," Donev complained to Forum 18. "I could have said no, but it was more than just a kind request. I don't know if he had the right to summon me." Donev said Marinov had told him that they should have "no hope" of having such a chaplaincy ministry and demanded that the Association hand over a full list of all those present at the founding meeting. Donev refused. "It came as a shock to realise our work had been noticed on such a level," he told Forum 18. "Marinov was polite but firm in what he wanted."

In early December 2006, Marinov invited in the head of the Association's board, Mladen Buchukov, for a meeting at which the British military attache was also present. "At this meeting, Vasil Marinov let me know clearly that it is up to him to make chaplaincy in Bulgaria possible," Buchukov told Forum 18 on 16 February. "I thought that he wants to exercise control over the Chaplaincy Association."

Marinov told Forum 18 on 23 February that he had met both Donev and Buchukov, but denied he had "summoned" them. Marinov refused to say whether he had asked for a list of those attending the Association's founding meeting. He said he had explained to Donev that the Association should be recognised by international chaplaincy bodies, but refused to explain to Forum 18 why it was the concern of a Justice Ministry official whether the Association had such international ties or not. He insisted he knows Pastor Donev well. "I appreciate his efforts to establish a chaplain's organisation for the armed forces."

The Association then held an additional formal meeting on 21 October, in the presence of their lawyer, and the record of that meeting was submitted with the registration application as a non-governmental organisation to the Yambol Municipal Court that month. "The court didn't refuse us, but simply failed to register us," Donev recalled. "Every week they summoned our representative and lawyer with new questions. The Association was requested to prove that its existence and activities would not in any form resemble the activities of a local church, denomination or religious confession. They kept wanting to know if we were a new religious denomination, in which case they would be able to avoid taking a decision and send us to the Sofia Municipal Court." Buchukov termed the court's repeated demands for new documents "an absurdity".

However, a Bulgarian religious freedom lawyer, Ivan Gruikin, observed that the Yambol regional court is a comparatively small court. He told Forum 18 on 27 February that this accounted for the court's failure to register the Association. The court's company department - which is responsible for the registration of companies and associations - has very little experience, especially in registering non-governmental organisations.

With the lack of response from the Yambol court, the Association withdrew its application in mid-January and transferred its attempts to the Sofia Municipal Court, which granted the Association legal status as a non-governmental organisation on 23 February. Ivan Gruikin commented that this means that the Association's legal problems are at an end.

The delays have caused concern amongst some in Bulgaria. Viktor Kostov, who runs a Bulgarian religious freedom website <<http://www.center-religiousfreedom.com>>, described the delays in granting the Association legal status as "clearly a religious liberty violation".

It is possible that the issue of who is involved in chaplaincy work in the armed forces may cause future controversy with the state's Religious Affairs Directorate. Lt.-Col. Dobrev of the Defence Ministry told Forum 18 that he had not previously heard of the Chaplaincy Association, but said he knew of some small-scale Protestant chaplaincy ministry. He insisted that, even after a chaplaincy service within the armed forces is introduced, the decision will remain with the government's Religious Affairs Directorate as to which faiths will be able to conduct such chaplaincy ministry. "They have a list of which faiths are recognised and which are banned," he said. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Bulgaria religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=745>

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

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