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UKRAINE: Russian hand behind Japanese monk's entry denial?

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

Ukraine's security police have refused to explain to Forum 18 News Service why Japanese Buddhist monk and teacher Junsei Teresawa was taken off the train from Poland last night (4 May) and refused entry, while his valid visa was cancelled. But security police spokesperson Marina Ostapenko vigorously denied it is because Ukraine is following Russia's secret police blacklist. "If Ukraine barred him entry he must have done something here," she insisted to Forum 18 News Service. "What's it got to do with Russia?" Teresawa described the ban to Forum 18 as "unjust, unreasonable and unconstitutional".

Members of the Buddhist Nipponzan Myohoji Order in Ukraine have protested against the cancellation of the visa of Japanese monk and teacher Junsei Teresawa on security police instructions late last night (4 May) and his transfer back to Poland. "His many Buddhist disciples in Ukraine have now been deprived of the right to hear their teacher," the Order's spokesperson Yevgeny Ihelzon told Forum 18 News Service from the Ukrainian capital Kiev on 5 May. "This is really strange - there is no reason for this." The SBU security police insisted to Forum 18 Teresawa must have violated Ukrainian law or be wanted internationally to be barred entry and denied that his presence on a Russian blacklist would have any impact in Ukraine.

Ihelzon rejected these assertions. "Teresawa never broke the law on his many visits to Ukraine over the past fourteen years. In the opinion of our Order, this is a case of political and religious persecution." He insisted the SBU must give its reasons. "Why does our government and security service follow orders from another country - especially after our Orange Revolution?" he asked, referring to Russia. "I thought everything had changed now."

Teresawa, who is 54, was taken off the Warsaw to Lviv train at the border crossing at Mostiska. Ukrainian border guards cancelled his double-entry visa, stamping "annulled" across it, barred him entry for five years and issued him with a certificate signed by senior lieutenant O. Pits declaring that he had been denied entry on orders of the SBU (Forum 18 has seen copies of the cancelled visa and certificate).

SBU spokesperson Marina Ostapenko maintained that Teresawa had in fact been barred entry in July 2002 for five years under Article 25 of the law on the legal status of foreigners and those without citizenship. "His ban is in the interest of protecting the security of Ukraine," she told Forum 18 from Kiev on 5 May. She did not explain why Teresawa's passport was stamped to say that he has been barred until 4 May 2010 if he was blacklisted as far back as 2002.

Ostapenko refused to give any specific reason for the decision, citing "state secrecy", and resolutely rejected suggestions that Ukraine was following Russia's blacklist. "If Ukraine barred him entry he must have done something here," she insisted. "What's it got to do with Russia?"

Ihelzon said Teresawa - well known as a pacifist who has organised numerous peace camps and marches - has been visiting Buddhist communities in the former Soviet republics since 1991. "He was denied entry to Russia and placed on the Russian FSB [security service] entry blacklist in June 2000 after protesting against the war in Chechnya," Ihelzon told Forum 18. "The Russian blacklist is transferred to other CIS countries."

He said the monk was denied entry to Ukraine at Kiev's Boryspil airport in February 2004 despite having a valid visa. However, he was able to enter Ukraine in December after the change of regime known as the Orange Revolution. It remains unclear why he has once again been barred.

Teresawa insisted that his sole purpose in travelling to Ukraine was to teach and said he had intended to stay about two weeks. "I have disciples I'm responsible for teaching," he told Forum 18 from the Polish town of Przemysl on 5 May. "I'm not a missionary." Describing the ban as "unjust, unreasonable and unconstitutional", he attributed it to Russia's dislike of his outspoken criticism of its human rights violations in the Chechen war.

Teresawa has been able to visit Kyrgyzstan and Georgia without problem since being blacklisted by Russia, though Kazakhstan and Ukraine have traditionally followed the Russian blacklist. Teresawa confirmed to Forum 18 he has been denied entry to Kazakhstan three times, most recently in March 2004.

Ostapenko of the SBU said some 6,000 foreign citizens have been denied entry to Ukraine over the past five years. "We don't separate them out into those barred on religious grounds and other grounds."

Among other foreign religious leaders denied entry in the past are American Protestant David Binkley, who was barred at Boryspil airport in July 2000 despite having a valid visa, and Ukrainian-born Moldovan citizen Father Nicolae Asargiu, an Orthodox priest of the Bessarabian jurisdiction, who was expelled and barred entry for five years in 1998 after "violating the law on religion" by working in his native village in Odessa region. In Binkley's case, he was barred "permanently" from Russia and was subsequently denied entry to Kazakhstan.

Russia has continued to ban foreign religious figures it does not like (see F18News 4 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=555).

Ihelzon told Forum 18 that all five communities of his Buddhist Order in Ukraine have been given registration by the government and do not face any problems. "Four or five years ago we had a lot of problems getting registration, but there's no problem now." He welcomed the abolition on orders of the new president Viktor Yushchenko of the State Committee for Religious Affairs.

For a personal commentary on Ukraine's abolition of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, see F18News 16 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=526).

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

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