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RUSSIA: Church stolen at Christmas

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

Just before western Christmas, on 23 December, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that the new "owners" of a Methodist church in Moscow "violently and with the use of force" evicted Pastor Kim-Jun-Kyu, his family including two young children, and a range of other church officials, without even giving them time to dress before throwing them onto the cold street at 7 am. Church members immediately contacted the police, who have now sealed the building against both the new "owners" and church members. The church held a Christmas service on the street outside the church, and will be holding another street service this coming Sunday. Pastor Mikhail Kuznetsov, of the Moscow Interconfessional Pastors' Council, has told Forum 18 that "the violence was accompanied by nationalistic expressions and crude insults towards the Protestants," and has called for a special night of prayer for the church on 2 to 3 January 2004.

Guards loyal to the new "owners" of a Methodist church in the Russian capital have evicted church members inside who were trying to protect their place of worship from illegal seizure, Russia's Methodist leader Bishop Ruediger Minor told Forum 18 News Service on 26 December. The new "owners" claim to ownership appears to be without any legal foundation and is strongly disputed by the church (See F18News 15 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=214).

Church members said that the guards evicted the church members at 7 am local time on 23 December, giving them no time even to dress before throwing them out onto the cold street. At least ten guards from the Rodon security company "violently and with the use of force" evicted Pastor Kim-Jun-Kyu and his family (including two young children), as well as a range of other church officials. Pastor Valery He told Forum 18 from Moscow on 25 December that "the guards broke down all the closed doors, from the fourth floor down to the first floor". Church members immediately contacted the police, who took the guards to a police station but soon released them. Church members had to hold a Christmas service on 24 December on the street outside the church.

Problems began for the United Methodist Kwan Lim (Burning Bush, Kvanrim in Russian) church back in 2002, when, unknown to the church, a group of individuals held what they claimed was a valid church meeting which changed the church's founding document and replaced the entire leadership. Moscow's Justice Department registered the new founding document without checking the authenticity of it with church leaders or the United Methodist Church of Russia, a registered centralised religious organisation of which the Kwan Lim church is a part. The local city justice department has claimed to Forum 18 that it registered the new founding document in line with regulations, although the legality of both the "owners" and the department's actions is very strongly disputed. (see F18News 16 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=215).

Rodon guards engaged by the company Khant, which claims it now owns the building, seized the church on 9 December, but initially took no action to evict church members inside. Some 300 people attended the most recent Sunday service on 21 December. The guards allowed in those listed as church members. However, church administrator Svetlana Kim complained that the guards had often made insulting remarks about the Methodists, calling them "sectarians".

Church members evicted on 23 December, who included 13 students of the Reformation College which is based in the building, have pledged to continue defending their church, Pastor He reported. They have begun staying the night in a bus parked outside the building in northern Moscow. The church's lawyers have already visited the site. At the 24 December service on western Christmas Eve, Pastor Kim called on church members to come to the church as usual for the next Sunday service. The security guards are also remaining in their own vehicle next to the church, as the police have now sealed the building against both the guards and church members.

Other Protestants have expressed support for the beleaguered Methodists, including Pastor Mikhail Kuznetsov, who spoke of his "deep sympathy over the sad incident". The Kwan Lim church is a member of the Moscow Interconfessional Pastors' Council, which Kuznetsov leads. "The violence was accompanied by nationalistic expressions and crude insults towards the Protestants," he complained on 25 December. He declared a special night of prayer for the church on 2 to 3 January.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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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