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BELARUS: Last minute reprieve for charismatic church

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

The eviction of the New Life Pentecostal Church from its building in the Belarusian capital Minsk - due this morning (5 December) - has been called off. All was quiet as the deadline passed this morning, New Life's administrator Vitaly Antonchikov told Forum 18 News Service. "There will be no eviction," court executor Olga Shcherbovich, assured Forum 18 yesterday afternoon, 4 December. "There was a document, there was action; the document was withdrawn, the action stopped." The Church meets in a former cow barn it bought and renovated, but the authorities have never legalised its use and have been trying to evict the Church for a decade. "This isn't the end, of course - the eviction is cancelled, but legally our land and building still belong to the authorities," Antonchikov told Forum 18.

"There will be no eviction," the court executor who signed last week's eviction notice against Minsk charismatic church New Life, Olga Shcherbovich, assured Forum 18 News Service yesterday afternoon, 4 December. "There was a document, there was action; the document was withdrawn, the action stopped." The eviction was to have taken place this morning, 5 December.

"This isn't the end, of course - the eviction is cancelled, but legally our land and building still belong to the authorities," New Life's administrator Vitaly Antonchikov told Forum 18 on 5 December. The authorities could seek to evict the Church in future, he confirmed. But for now, the congregation is overjoyed, and will celebrate with a thanksgiving service this evening instead of gathering at the appointed eviction hour this morning, Antonchikov told Forum 18.

Shcherbovich's 27 November eviction notice had instructed New Life Church to prepare keys to its building for a hand-over to state representatives at 11am on 5 December. It also ordered the local housing authority of Minsk's Moscow District to provide "vehicles, manpower and everything necessary to evict the debtor" in case of forced eviction. The notice was to implement Minsk Higher Economic Court's eviction order of 23 October 2012 (see F18News 28 November 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1772>).

At 11.30am Minsk time on 5 December - half an hour after the eviction was due to take place - all was quiet at New Life's building, Church administrator Antonchikov confirmed to Forum 18.

New Life is famous for its 10-year fight to keep control of its private church property, a renovated cow barn on the edge of Minsk. The city authorities have blocked the 1000-strong congregation's efforts to use the building in line with Belarusian law, thereby stripping its rights to the property. A hunger strike by New Life members, visits by foreign diplomats and messages of support from around the world prevented the state from seizing the building in 2006.

Demand withdrawn

The 5 December eviction will not take place because Moscow District housing authority (ZhREO) - the plaintiff in the case - has withdrawn its eviction demand, court executor Shcherbovich explained to Forum 18 on 4 December. "I have nothing to execute."

At the District housing authority, Forum 18 was told to call its legal expert, but on 5 December she declined to comment on the case without an order to do so from her director.

Shcherbovich also maintained to Forum 18 on 4 December that she had sent written confirmation of the eviction cancellation to both New Life and the housing authority on 29 November. "They should have received it by registered post - let them go down to the post office and get it."

Speaking to Forum 18 just minutes earlier, New Life member and lawyer Sergei Lukanin was unaware of the development, however.

Seen by Forum 18, two documents issued on 29 November and signed by Shcherbovich of Minsk's Higher Economic Court specify that she is returning the eviction order to the housing authority unimplemented, closing the case and filing it in the Court's archives. The documents explain that this is due to a request from the housing authority for its eviction order to be withdrawn.

Church lawyer Lukanin collected the two documents from the Higher Economic Court on the evening of 4 December. This was after Shcherbovich telephoned church administrator Antonchikov around 8pm to say that the eviction had been called off, Antonchikov told Forum 18 on 5 December.

According to Antonchikov, Shcherbovich had looked up New Life's contact details on its website. "She said she had posted notification and thought the Church had received it," he told Forum 18. "But then she saw the reaction on the Internet and everywhere, and that we were still preparing for the eviction to happen, so she decided to call and tell us that it had been cancelled so we wouldn't worry." The Church had not received the postal notification sent by Shcherbovich on 29 November, he added.

Mass support

As in 2006, many within Belarus and abroad had begun to rally in New Life's defence. Belarus' 50,000-strong main Pentecostal Church declared its support in a 30 November statement on its website. Condemning the possibility of being turned out onto the street as a practice of "the years of militant atheism", this called upon all its members to pray for the Church.

On 4 December, the day before the eviction was due to take place, the Pentecostals' acting Bishop Sergei Tsvor invited Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and Lukanin to a prayer meeting of pastors from Minsk and Minsk Region. "Afterwards many pastors came up to us to express their support and said they would join us on 5 December," Lukanin told Forum 18. New Life belongs to the smaller Full Gospel Union.

The deputy head of mission at the British Embassy in Minsk, Jim Couzens, visited New Life on 4 December. According to the Church's website, he informed its representatives that European ambassadors were watching the situation attentively, and that personnel from some diplomatic representations also planned to visit on 5 December.

In Ukraine, local Christians organised a protest outside the Belarusian Embassy in Kiev on 4 December. On 28 November, the day after receiving the eviction order, New Life reported already receiving messages of support from Christians in Australia, Germany, Ireland, Israel and the USA.

Ten-year struggle

Purchased in 2002, New Life's building - a spacious, modern barn-like structure on the edge of Minsk - is legally still a cowshed. The state authorities have repeatedly refused to allow the church to legalise its position by changing the building's designation to a house of worship, or to use it for services. The congregation's defiant worship at the building has resulted in multiple large fines in addition to its formal confiscation (see F18News 17 August 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=832>).

The congregation has nowhere else to meet, having earlier been barred from public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk. It toyed with the idea of keeping several cows at the church so as to comply with the building's designation, but animal husbandry is now banned in Minsk (see F18News 28 July 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619>).

A high point in New Life's battle with the Minsk authorities came in October 2006, when officials dispatched a bulldozer with the apparent intention of razing the charismatic congregation's building. The church embarked on a high-profile hunger strike in its defence.

After letters of support from all over the world began pouring in to President Lukashenko, the church's pastor, Goncharenko, was invited to see a top-ranking presidential administration official, Oleg Proleskovsky, who hinted that a legal resolution was possible (see F18News 20 October 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858>).

Despite this, the Higher Economic Court threw out New Life's subsequent appeal against state moves to seize its building on 13 January 2009, taking the church's situation back to square one (see F18News 26 January 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1244>).

The eviction notice previous to yesterday's was issued in August 2009, and similarly ordered New Life to vacate its church building within seven days. On that occasion the congregation refused to let court executors in, or to accept compensation for the building, claiming the sum to be far below the current market value (see F18News 24 August 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1339>).

Since then, like most other faith communities in Belarus, New Life has experienced some relaxation in state pressure. An exception is the Jehovah's Witnesses (see most recently F18News 28 November 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1772>).

Under President Aleksandr Lukashenko, Protestant communities have generally found it impossible to get property redesignated so that it can be legally used for worship. If a building is not a designated house of worship, advance state permission is needed for

religious activity, and anti-Protestant officials refuse to grant it. Orthodox and Catholic communities are rarely affected, partly due the state's more positive attitude towards them, but also because they are more likely to occupy historically preserved, designated worship buildings (see F18News 30 May 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966>) (END).

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131>.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1311>.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Belarus>>.

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