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RUSSIA: Evicted Moscow Methodists given temporary access

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

After six freezing nights on the street outside their stolen building, members of the Korean Kwan Lim Methodist church in northern Moscow were allowed temporary access by police on 29 December. "Nothing has changed legally," United Methodist Church superintendent for northern Moscow Pastor Valeri He told Forum 18 News Service, acknowledging that church members are now "at least able to await a court verdict in the warm". A local court is due to set a date soon after 7 January to hear the church's complaint that the Moscow justice department accepted the fraudulently-amended church charter which allowed a commercial firm to seize the Methodists' building. The justice department has claimed to Forum 18 that the changes to the charter were made in accordance with the law.

Late on 29 December members of the Korean Kwan Lim ("Burning Bush", Kvanrim in Russian) Methodist Church were granted access to their four-storey building in northern Moscow. Forcibly evicted on 23 December by security guards representing a commercial firm claiming ownership of the premises, the Methodists spent the interim frozen nights in a bus on the street outside (see F18News 26 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=220).

Arriving at the church on 3 January, Forum 18 News Service found that two of the firm's security guards were not preventing access to the building and was directed by a church receptionist to the second floor, where a group of Korean and Russian children and their parents were enjoying a puppet show of the Nativity.

Despite this development, "nothing has changed legally," the Russian United Methodist Church's superintendent for the northern district of Moscow told Forum 18 on 31 December. Pastor Valeri He also acknowledged, however, that church members are now "at least able to await a court verdict in the warm".

In the church office, Kwan Lim's administrator Svetlana Kim explained to Forum 18 that local police have decided to allow both claimants access to the building - built with financial support from Methodists in South Korea in 1995 and estimated by the church to be worth over three million US dollars - until the issue of ownership is resolved by the courts. A date for the first hearing of a suit filed against Moscow department of justice by the church on 23 September 2003 should be set soon after 7 January, she said.

The church is accusing the Moscow justice department of accepting documents issued with a false stamp which were subsequently used to create a "Kwan Lim" company, to transfer ownership of the church building to that company and then sell it on to first one and then another commercial firm at a fraction of its market price, all without the church's knowledge.

According to Kim, this was achieved after a person unconnected with Kwan Lim reported the loss of the church's charter to local police and was issued with a copy by Moscow's department of justice. Various amendments to the charter - including a complete change of leadership - were registered by the same department soon afterwards on 23 May 2002.

When representatives of the second commercial firm demanded access to the building in September 2002, said Kim, officials of Moscow's northern administrative district opened a criminal investigation at the church's request, but once this was closed due to lack of evidence on 6 December 2003, Kwan Lim lost control of the building.

The church, however, continues to suspect foul play. Svetlana Kim showed Forum 18 slight but detectable differences between the church's official stamp and that used by the person claiming to have replaced her as administrator. She queried why the Moscow justice department had not checked whether this person was authorised to act in the name of the church, why it overlooked the complete omission of the Russian United Methodist Church - to which Kwan Lim is affiliated - in the amended charter and why two of the department's employees had requested the floor plans of all four storeys of the church during a check-up in autumn 2001. In particular, she questioned how those who staged the 24 April 2002 "church meeting" at a local stadium which approved the changes to the charter and leadership could have correctly numbered it as sixth without assistance from the justice department.

In a written response on 16 December to Forum 18's enquiries about the transfer of the building, the head of the registration department for religious organisations at the city justice department, Aleksandr Buksman, claimed that the application to amend the church's charter and governing body had been submitted in full compliance with the relevant part of Russia's 1997 law on religion.

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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