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BELARUS: Raids, threats, warnings for religious meetings

By Olga Glace, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Religious communities in various parts of Belarus have faced visits, threats and warnings for holding meetings for worship which officials regard as illegal. On one Sunday in January, officials visited three Pentecostal services in separate villages. Pastor Vasili Raptsevich - who led worship in a church-owned house in a village in Brest Region for about ten disabled church members unable to travel to the main congregation in a nearby town - was summoned to the police station. There he was told that he had violated the law by conducting a religious service away from its legal address without permission from the Regional Executive Committee. Police threatened him with court proceedings and threatened to strip his Pentecostal church of state registration, he told Forum 18 News Service. In February, police in the capital Minsk - among them masked riot police - launched a mass raid on a cultural meeting being held in a Pentecostal pastor's home. 34 participants were taken to a police station, but were released two hours later without any explanation and without any official record being drawn up. Police refused to comment to Forum 18.

On the same Sunday in January, police and local officials visited three worship services in villages in different parts of Belarus, issuing threats and warnings over what they claimed were unauthorised meetings, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Court proceedings against two of their pastors might follow. In February, police in the capital Minsk launched a mass raid on a cultural meeting being held in a pastor's home. All were meetings organised by local congregations of the Pentecostal Church. Three Jehovah Witness communities which have been unable to gain compulsory state registration suffered raids during meetings for worship in the last quarter of 2011.

Belarus imposes strict controls on exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission. All unregistered activity is banned under the highly restrictive 2002 Religion Law, while activity by registered religious communities away from their legal address is similarly illegal (see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1311>).

Raid

Police raided a meeting to discuss historical and cultural issues in Minsk on the evening of 8 February. About 34 members of several Minsk Protestant churches - including Grace Church and the Church of Jesus Christ - and a small number of students who did not belong to any church were detained.

An hour after the meeting started in the house of Antoni Bokun, Pastor of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, OMON special riot police officers - some in masks - broke in through the windows and ordered all the 55 people present, including children, to gather in one room. The police explained to the detained that a police hotline had received a call informing them of a secret drug laboratory in the Pastor's house. 34 participants were taken to a police station, but were released two hours later without any explanation and without any official record being drawn up. (Drawing up such a record is a legal requirement.)

Dmitry Fedoruk, a Pentecostal who took part in the meeting, expressed his doubts to Forum 18 on 9 February that it was a raid in search of drugs, as the officers were unarmed, did not have forensic investigators and sniffer dogs with them to search for drugs. Without presenting identification, officers took out cameras and started to videotape.

Another member of John the Baptist Church, Boris Goretsky, told Forum 18 on 9 February that, besides intimidation, the purpose of the raid was to get more information about the meetings and the people who attend them.

"Though it was not a religious meeting, this one had a symbolic topic: we were to discuss a book by Belarusian writer Franciszek Alachnowicz about the punitive Soviet system," commented Pastor Bokun to Forum 18 on 9 February. The next discussion in the series is to cover a "long expected event" - publishing the Bible in Belarusian.

"The only thing they wanted was to arrest everyone.."

John the Baptist Pentecostal Church has faced pressure in the past. For example, Pastor Bokun was fined and detained for three days in 2007 for religious activities without state permission (see F18News 5 June 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=969>).

Asked if he connected the raid with his previous difficulties, Pastor Bokun said that the intruders gave no reason for such connection. "We were not asked any questions and nobody answered ours," remembers the pastor. "It seemed that the only thing they wanted was to arrest everyone, take passport details and then release us." He also remarked that it was just like in Soviet times, when police were waiting at the door of the church taking passport details of those attending worship.

Dmitry Fedoruk, who was among those detained, told Forum 18 that at the police station those detained had a chance to pray and sing. "The policemen were at first at a loss, then pretended that they didn't care, and finally started to feel nervous," commented Pastor Bokun. He added that many of Minsk's senior police officers were present, but none of them were able to explain to the detained church members what was going on.

Forum 18 reached the head of Moscow District Police Station, Nikolai Nazarov, on 10 February. But he refused to give any comments on the police action.

Complaints at police action

Sergey Khomich, Bishop of the Pentecostal Union to which John the Baptist Church belongs, said that he was shocked by the police actions. "The meeting was within the bounds of the Church's Statute and no law was violated," he told Forum 18 on 14 February. On 13 February, he submitted a written complaint to Aleksandr Barsukov, the head of Minsk City Police.

A formal official reply of 17 February, signed by the Head of Minsk Security Police Yury Sorokin and seen by Forum 18, informed Bishop Khomich that his complaint would be not considered because he had not attached documents confirming his position. Despite this, the letter was addressed to him as Bishop of the Pentecostal Union at his Church's address.

When Forum 18 called the Minsk City Police on 14 February, the person who answered the phone refused to transfer the call to Colonel Barsukov. Forum 18 repeatedly called the Police Press Service on 9, 10 and 14 February, but each time the telephone went unanswered.

Threats, warnings

Three Pentecostal pastors faced problems in January for leading religious worship which the authorities regarded as illegal. At least two of them received verbal official warnings and were required to sign official records.

On 8 January in the village of Ogarevichi in Brest Region, local officials and a local police officer attended Sunday worship led by Pastor Vasili Raptsevich. Two days later, Pastor Raptsevich was summoned to the police station in Gantsevichi where the Pentecostal community is registered. There he was told that he had violated the law by conducting a religious service away from its legal address without permission from the Regional Executive Committee. Ogarevichi is about seven kms (four miles) from Gantsevichi.

"In Ogarevichi there are about ten disabled believers who can't walk without crutches and we have been visiting them regularly for many years," Pastor Raptsevich told Forum 18 on 19 February. In 2011 the Gantsevichi Pentecostal community bought a house in the village to make it easier for the disabled church members to pray together.

"At the police station they threatened to take away the church's registration if I don't stop violating the law," Pastor Raptsevich complained to Forum 18. Though he denied all the charges - insisting that since the church bought the house it could use it for religious purposes - he was made to sign an official record. He was told that he would be summoned to court later.

On 20 February, Forum 18 reached local police officer Andrei Bukato, who had taken part in the raid, but he refused to give any comments.

When Pastor Raptsevich later talked with the Deputy Head of Gantsevichi Regional Executive Committee Nikolai Volynets, he told the pastor either to apply for permission or visit the believers individually in their homes. He insisted that Pastor Raptsevich and the church had violated the law.

Volynets acknowledged to Forum 18 on 20 February that Pastor Raptsevich had been warned, but explained: "It's not a question of prohibiting, but of keeping all the formalities."

On 8 January in the village of Lasitsk, 45 kms (28 miles) from Pinsk, the authorities also attended the congregation's Sunday service. Officials issued Pastor Anton Yatskevich with an official warning. "There are a lot of people with different problems who need help, and as Lasitsk village is too far from Pinsk we come ourselves," Pastor Yatskevich told Forum 18 on 19 February. He pointed out that the Lasitsk congregation has fewer than twenty members, not enough to register a community. Yatskevich declined to blame the authorities for checking on the church's services, though. "They get complaints from Orthodox believers and have to respond."

Forum 18 called the village council, but the phone went unanswered on 20 and 21 February.

Also on 8 January, Pentecostal Pastor Viktor Kokhovets was given an official warning for leading Sunday worship in the village of Kovnyatin in Pinsk Region, the Bishop's Assistant in the Brest and Pinsk regions Fyodor Suvorov told Forum 18 on 17 February.

Forum 18 repeatedly called the head of the village council Konstantin Shlyazhko on 24 and 27 February to find out why Pastor Khokhovets had been warned for leading religious worship, but the telephone went unanswered.

Police officers told Pastor Raptsevich that he would face a court. It remains unclear if Yatskevich faces a court hearing. The Bishop's assistant told Forum 18 that Kokhovets simply received a warning and no court procedures are expected "unless there are further violations".

Administrative Code Article "somehow expanded to religious meetings too"

Although amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences which came into force in February 2010 removed penalties specifically for unregistered religious activity, fines have continued. Administrative Article 23.34 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration") is frequently used to punish individuals for unapproved religious meetings (see F18News 9 April 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1430>).

Under Article 23.34, Part 2, a mass event or a demonstration can be organised and conducted only with permission from the local authorities. The lawyer of the Pentecostal church commented to Forum 18 from Minsk on 21 February that this article originally was targeted at political events but "somehow expanded to religious meetings too".

Unregistered religious activity is still punishable under Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code ("Illegal organisation of, or participation in the activities of, an unregistered political party, foundation, civil or religious organisation"), with punishments ranging from a fine to imprisonment of up to two years. Forum 18 is not aware of any cases when Article 193-1 has been used to punish unregistered religious activity, though its use has been threatened against religious leaders (see F18News 19 May 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1572>).

Campaigners for Article 193-1 to be abolished - and for the ban on unregistered religious, political and social activity to be lifted - have stepped up their campaign. The religious freedom group, the Right to Belief, and the Assembly of Non-governmental Democratic Organisations wrote in mid-January to about ten state agencies, including both chambers of Parliament, the Presidential Administration and the Justice Ministry.

Aleksei Shein - an activist of the Christian Democratic Party and the Right to Belief's co-ordinator - also launched an internet petition <<http://www.change.org/petitions/belarusian-authorities>>. As of 27 February, the petition had 639 signatures.

Shein complained that at least 18 people had been prosecuted under Article 193-1 since 2006. "The recent tendency is that warnings about the unacceptability of activity [by organisations] without state registration are being used against representatives of religious communities," he wrote in his explanation as to why he had launched the petition.

He warned that "hundreds of Christian communities, ministries and rehabilitation centres do not have registration for various reasons" and risk prosecution under Article 193-1.

Shein told Forum 18 from Minsk on 27 February that about ten agencies had responded, but all but two replies had been only "formal responses which failed to tackle the substance of our complaints".

In her 27 January response seen by Forum 18, the Deputy Head of the Permanent Commission on Legislation and State Building of Parliament's upper chamber, Liliya Moroz, rejected their complaint that Article 193-1 violates human rights. She insisted that the Article and other legal provisions are needed as the legal basis "for the fight against crimes which violate citizens' constitutional rights and freedoms, as well as order and security in society".

Venice Commission criticism

On 18 October 2011, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission – of which Belarus is an Associate Member – published its Opinion on the compatibility of Criminal Code Article 193-1 with international human rights standards (<<http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2011/CDL-AD%282011%29036-e.pdf>>). "It lies at the heart of the freedom of association that an individual or group of individuals may freely establish an association, determine its organization and lawful purposes, and put these purposes into practice by performing those activities that are instrumental to its functions," it noted.

"The right to freedom of association is intertwined with the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, opinion and expression."

The Venice Commission criticised the “high and strict framework” which makes registering organisations difficult, and “cumbersome processes” which often lead to registration denials.

It complained that criminal liability under Article 193-1 has a “chilling effect”, and gives the authorities “a wide latitude to interfere with the fundamental right of freedom of association, and furthermore freedom of thought, opinion and expression”. “The Venice Commission considers that by criminalizing the participation of an individual in non-registered association, the existence of Article 193-1 constitutes a form of coercion incompatible with the voluntary nature of this right.”

Raids on Jehovah's Witness meetings

Three Jehovah Witness communities suffered raids during meetings for worship in the last quarter of 2011 in the wake of repeated failure to obtain state registration. Unlike Minsk Pentecostal Pastor Bokun, who did not know why his house was raided, Jehovah's Witnesses expected to see such raids.

On 25 September 2011, police broke into a private home in Mikashevichi in Brest Region during the religious service.

On 13 October 2011, police raided their meeting taking place in a private apartment in Bykhov in Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region. The community had been refused registration as it does not have the twenty adult citizen members needed to apply.

On 24 November 2011, police raided their religious meeting held in a private home in Svetlogorsk, the Gomel [Homel] region. Police interrogated the participants, videotaped the proceedings and confiscated religious literature.

Pavel Yadlovsky, who chairs the Religious Association of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belarus, stressed that their communities want to follow state registration requirements. Despite repeatedly submitting registration applications for these communities, officials will not grant registration. The main problem is the inability to get an address which the authorities will allow a religious community to use as its legal address (see F18News 30 March 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1556> and 18 October 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1626>).

Most recent fine

Raids or visits by officials to the Jehovah's Witness meetings in late 2011 and to Pentecostal meetings in early 2012 have not so far led to fines. But officials do take cases to court and fines are imposed for exercising religious freedom by meeting together without state approval.

The most recent known fine was of Pastor Aleksei Abramovich, who leads the congregation of the Council of Churches Baptists in Zhodino in Minsk Region. He was fined several weeks' average local wages on 20 September 2011 for unregistered religious meetings (see F18News 18 October 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1626>). (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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