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RUSSIA: Raids on meetings for worship increasing?

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

Russian police and other security agencies appear to increasingly be raiding religious communities as they meet for worship, Forum 18 News Service notes. Police have often raided and searched places of worship - particularly of Jehovah's Witnesses - but not when services and meetings are underway. Raids on religious communities as they meet for worship are rarer, though these have increased. In September, four Jehovah's Witness communities in the Chuvash Republic, and one Muslim community in Belgorod Region, were raided as they met for worship. One Jehovah's Witness is now facing "extremism" criminal charges. In Belgorod, several hundred Muslims were in the middle of Friday prayers when police - some with weapons and wearing masks - broke up the service, claiming to be looking for illegal immigrants. Of more than 350 men present, more than 150 were taken to police stations. Only six were found to be in Russia illegally. "We ourselves have asked the police why they didn't wait until our prayers were over," community leader Ramazan Ramazanov told Forum 18. "We have had no reply yet."

Russian police and other security agencies appear to increasingly be raiding religious communities as they meet for worship, Forum 18 News Service notes. In September, four Jehovah's Witness communities in the Chuvash Republic, on the Volga, and one Muslim community in Belgorod Region, on Russia's border with Ukraine, were raided as they met for worship. In Belgorod, several hundred Muslims were in the middle of Friday prayers when police - some with weapons and wearing masks - broke up the service, claiming to be looking for illegal immigrants. Of more than 350 men present, more than 150 were taken to police stations. Only six were found to be in Russia without a legal basis, according to the police report.

Police have often raided and searched places of worship - particularly of Jehovah's Witnesses - but not when services and meetings are underway. Raids on religious communities as they meet for worship are rarer, though these have increased in recent years. In February 2010 armed police with dogs raided a Lutheran Sunday morning service in their church in Kaluga. The Lutheran pastor preaching at that service, drawing on the experience of being raided, later wrote an article with advice on "How to behave during raids" (see F18News 23 March 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1425>). In April 2010 police and an Federal Security Service (FSB) officer raided the Sunday morning service of a Baptist church in a private home in Elektrostal near Moscow (see F18News 2 August 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1473>).

Most raids on worship services have affected Jehovah's Witness communities. "Reports come in every month of such raids on our services from across the country," Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Grigory Martynov complained to Forum 18 from St Petersburg on 20 October.

At the same time, the number of administrative fines for leading religious worship without the approval of the local authorities also appears to be rising (see forthcoming F18News article).

Coordinated Chuvashia raids

Jehovah's Witnesses in the Chuvash Republic were the targets of a coordinated series of raids on meetings for worship and private homes. The searches and detentions on the evening of 7 September involved among others the ordinary police, officers from the regional police Anti-Extremism Centre, and OMON special police. Jehovah's Witnesses described this as "religious intolerance and aggression" that is "reminiscent of the Soviet era".

Eight police led by Pyotr Tetin, an officer in the police Department for Especially Important Cases, raided an evening meeting for worship in the regional capital Cheboksary. The officers threatened to use force, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18, and searched the Kingdom Hall where the Jehovah's Witnesses meet for four hours. Religious books and computers were seized.

A similar raid took place the same evening on another Kingdom Hall in Cheboksary. Those present were taken for questioning. Among those detained for 48 hours in Cheboksary was Andrei Nikolayev, who is now facing criminal charges (see below).

In the nearby satellite town of Novocheboksarsk, several police officers raided the evening Jehovah's Witness service held in rented accommodation. Officers searched the bags of those present and confiscated personal items. They refused to show any search warrant.

Also on the evening of 7 September, in the Chuvash town of Kanash, officers of the police Anti-Extremism Department, led by Sergei Derbenev from Cheboksary, raided the local Jehovah's Witness meeting. This time, officers showed a search warrant. Those present were forced - some being pushed by the officers - to go to the local police station, where they were searched and fingerprinted. Two, Farid Mannafov and Oleg Marchenko, were detained and taken to Cheboksary, 75 kms (45 miles) away.

Among homes searched that evening was that of Oleg Maksimov in Cheboksary. Anti-Extremism Police arrived at 5.30 pm, and spent more than six hours searching his home. The officers - Andrei Yegorov and Yevgeny Biryukov - repeatedly refused to show their identification. During the search on the home of Igor Yefimov in Novocheboksarsk, police seized Bibles, computer equipment and personal photographs.

Jehovah's Witnesses complain that the detention on 7 September of Nikolayev, Mannafov and Marchenko represents the first time since the Soviet period that their followers have been held in detention in Russia. Only on 8 September were local Jehovah's Witnesses able to discover where the three men were being held. Their homes were also searched. The three were freed on 9 September.

"I have no information"

No police Forum 18 contacted in the Chuvash Republic were able to explain why so many officers were sent on the coordinated raids.

Viktor Tolstov, a deputy Interior Minister of the Chuvash Republic, refused to discuss the raids. "I have no information," he told Forum 18 on 18 October. He then put the phone down. The assistant to Aleksandr Nikolayev, deputy head of the regional police with responsibility for operational work, refused to discuss the raids with Forum 18 on 18 October. He refused to put Forum 18 through to Nikolayev.

The telephone of Aleksei Metelkin, head of the police Anti-Extremism Centre in Cheboksary, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 17 and 21 October.

Aleksandr Velliullof, head of the regional OMON special police, denied to Forum 18 on 18 October that his officers had been involved.

Pyotr Guriev, deputy head of Kanash police, claimed that his officers took no part in the 7 September raid in the town on the local Jehovah's Witness meeting, or the detention and transfer to Cheboksary of Mannafov and Marchenko. However, he would not tell Forum 18 conclusively on 19 October whether or not the Kanash police had been informed about the raid. "Cheboksary police could conduct an operation here, but we know everything that goes on in the town."

"An operational measure has to be carried out when it is needed"

The only regional police officer prepared to discuss the raids was Dmitry Ivanov, the press officer. "No one was attacked," he claimed to Forum 18 on 19 October, "but religious believers shouldn't violate the law. The police acted entirely in accordance with the law." He insisted the raids were to identify individuals who were spreading inter-religious hatred or enmity. "We now have publications," he added, a reference to Jehovah's Witness literature confiscated during the raids.

Ivanov denied that any of the raids could have taken place without a warrant. "Police must have the correct documents." He said no complaints from Jehovah's Witnesses had come in, as far as he knew.

He said that Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in Chuvashia for "some decades" and there have been "no excesses" against them. "But now some of them violate the law - that's why cases have been launched. The issue is not about the organisation but about the individuals."

Forum 18 pointed out to Ivanov that only one criminal case has been launched in Chuvashia and that Russian law presumes individuals' innocence until any court hands down a guilty verdict. Forum 18 asked why, if that is the case, raids took place during worship and officers did not wait until innocent people had finished their worship. "An operational measure has to be carried out when it is needed," Ivanov told Forum 18.

Criminal case continues

The raids took place the day after a criminal case was launched on extremism-related charges against a Jehovah's Witness in Cheboksary. Chuvash Republic Investigation Committee press officer Oleg Dmitriev repeatedly refused to say who the Jehovah's Witness being investigated under Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1 ("Incitement of hatred [nenavist] or enmity [vrazhda], as well as the humiliation of human dignity"). But Jehovah's Witnesses themselves named him as 38-year-old Cheboksary resident Andrei Nikolayev.

His age, religious affiliation and place of residence match the details in the original 7 September Investigation Committee announcement (see F18News 12 September 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1612>). Dmitriev of the Investigation Committee did confirm that the case is not against fellow-Jehovah's Witness Mannafov, who is also 38 (though he lives in Kanash, not in Cheboksary). One other Jehovah's Witnesses was detained for 48 hours after the raids, but only one is facing charges. "Only when the investigation is completed will we give the name," Dmitriev told Forum 18 from Cheboksary on 19 October.

Nikolayev is being investigated under the same Criminal Code Article under which fellow Jehovah's Witness Aleksandr Kalistratov has been tried in Gorno-Altai. The verdict in Kalistratov's second trial is due on 3 November (see F18News 14 October 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1625>). Article 282 and other "anti-extremism" legislation has been heavily criticised (See the commentary by Aleksandr Verkhovsky of the SOVA Center at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468>).

Dmitriev of the Investigation Committee confirmed that the criminal case was launched on 6 September, the day before the raids. He declined to say what led the Investigation Committee to launch the case. "It is likely it was at the initiative of the FSB or the [police] Anti-Extremism Centre," he told Forum 18. He insisted that if presented with materials relating to a crime, "we have to launch such a case. This individual distributed extremist materials in two towns, Kanash and Cheboksary."

Dmitriev said this is the only criminal case in Chuvashia against any Jehovah's Witnesses. Asked if any cases will be brought against Mannafov or Marchenko, both also held under arrest for 48 hours with Nikolayev, Dmitriev said it is possible they might face administrative charges. "There must be a reason for their detention."

Asked if the investigator in the case, whom he would not name, had read the Supreme Court's 28 June instruction on extremism-related prosecutions, he insisted all at the Investigation Committee had done so. The Supreme Court warned that prosecutions under extremism-related charges should be brought with great care and only in limited circumstances (see F18News 19 July 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1594>)

Friday prayers raided in Belgorod

Officers of the police, FSB security service, and the Belgorod regional Federal Migration Service raided the Friday prayers on 9 September, held by registered local Muslim community Peace and Creation. The prayers were taking place in a rented factory in the industrial part of Belgorod.

"We ourselves have asked the police why they didn't wait until our prayers were over," community leader Ramazan Ramazanov told Forum 18 from Belgorod on 17 October. "We have had no reply yet."

Community leader Ramazanov told Forum 18 the raid happened while the Muslims were still praying. Special police in masks stopped the prayers and made all the men stand around the walls. He put the number of men detained at more than 350. He said women and children were in a separate room and were not affected.

A 10 September account by one of the Muslim men, posted the following day on the islamkuzbass.ru website, said that worshippers ignored the order to stand facing the walls and accompanying threats as they were about to begin the sunnat prayers at the end of the Friday namaz. "This is my house and I will do here what I want," the Muslim quoted one of the special police officers as shouting. As other police were driving the men out into the yard, the officer hit a student from Jordan and forced him to halt his sunnat prayers, the Muslim who says he was an eyewitness recounts.

Police told the Muslims not to use their phones to contact anyone, checked the pockets of all the men, then put them in special buses and took them to various local police stations, both Ramazanov and the written account said. They were fingerprinted and their identities checked. Some were not freed until midnight. Ramazanov was taken to Belgorod's central police station, where he was held for five hours.

A 12 September statement on the regional police website claimed the "operational-preventative measures" were directed at "uncovering illegal migrants, as well as other instances of other violations of migration law of the Russian Federation". The statement claimed that officers were verifying "operational information" that had come in. The statement made no mention of the fact that the raid was on a religious community in the middle of worship.

The police statement said more than 150 people had been detained, "many of whom turned out to be from Central Asia and the Middle East, some of whom did not speak Russian at all". But it stated that police found a total of six individuals present in Russia "without a legal basis".

"Egregious instance of violation of our civil rights"

"We consider this an egregious instance of violation of our civil rights and religious feelings," the Muslim recounted. He pointed out that this was the second such raid on the Belgorod Muslim community this year. The first was conducted in April.

The Muslim speculated that the raid might have been connected with coverage on regional television news of the community's celebration of Id al-Fitr at the end of Ramadan in late August, which had been attended by more than a thousand people. "We believe the broadcast disturbed the local authorities over the rise of the number of Muslims in Belgorod."

The Justice Ministry website notes that the Belgorod Peace and Creation Muslim community has had state registration since April 2006. Ramazanov told Forum 18 it had only been meeting in the rented factory for a month before the raid and had moved there because the community was growing.

No answers

Officials of Belgorod Regional Police and the FSB security service have also refused to answer Forum 18's questions why, if they wished to check individual worshippers' identity documents, they did not wait until Friday prayers were over.

"We have respect for all the people who live on this territory", Tatyana Kireyeva, spokesperson for Belgorod regional police, claimed to Forum 18 from Belgorod on 17 October. But asked repeatedly verbally and in writing to explain why armed police officers, some wearing masks, needed to raid the prayers and could not simply wait until they ended before checking documents, she declined to respond. "We have respect for people both during prayers, before prayers and after prayers."

Kireyeva insisted that everything the regional police could say about the incident was what was in the 12 September statement posted to the website. She repeated its assertion that six people had been found not to have a legal basis for being in Russia. Asked by Forum 18 whether it was a proportional act to interrupt by force the prayers of several hundred innocent people for six who, it seems, were in the country without a legal basis she was silent. She refused to say if the six had been prosecuted or deported.

"Other information about the work of police officers during this operational-preventative measure is for official use and is not for distribution in the media," Kireyeva added.

Vyacheslav Ryabkov, spokesperson for the regional FSB security service, insisted that assertions by the Muslims that force had been used were not true. "Violence didn't happen," he told Forum 18 from Belgorod on 18 October. "I was on holiday at the time, but police officers I have spoken with say such claims are not true." Asked why at least some of the officers were in masks and carrying weapons, he responded that he was not there so could not say. He insisted the police, not the FSB, had initiated the operation.

Ryabkov conceded that "a low number" of the Muslims present had turned out not to have correct documents. But - although he had been on holiday at the time - he insisted that prayers had finished by the time the raid took place.

However, Lyudmila Shevyakova, spokesperson for the regional Federal Migration Service, specifically denied that any officials from her service took part in the 9 September raid. "We didn't take part in organising or planning the operation," she told Forum 18 from Belgorod on 18 October. "The police merely called us in afterwards to check individuals' documents." Told that the police's 12 September statement identified them as having taken part, Shevyakova said this was not true and said her service had contacted the police to tell them so.

Raids common

Raids on individual Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi are common, as police and the FSB security service hunt for what they regard as "extremist" texts. Jehovah's Witness and Muslim readers of Nursi meeting in small groups in private homes are also frequently raided (see F18News 14 October 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1625>). Jehovah's Witness congresses have also been a target.

In a rare victory for Jehovah's Witnesses, on 9 June Judge Tatyana Timofeyeva of Tula Regional Court upheld a decision by Yefremov District Court which found a police raid on a worship gathering illegal, the court website noted. After four police officers raided the meeting in a private flat in Yefremov in January attended by about 20 people, local Jehovah's Witnesses challenged the legality of the police action, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The police officers - who had recommended to the Jehovah's Witnesses that they attend an Orthodox church instead - were required to apologise personally to all those present when the meeting was raided. However, this ruling did not address other raids which have taken place in Tula Region and throughout Russia (see eg. F18News 26 August 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1480>).

Outdoor public religious activity by Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees and Protestants has also resulted in state harassment (see F18News 26 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1469>). Hare Krishna devotees fear that they could be the next group targeted throughout Russia, as the authorities seek to have the Russian translation of the most important work for Hare Krishna devotees - the Bhagavad-Gita As it Is - banned as "extremist" (see F18News 10 October 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1623>). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196>.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: - 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287> - and - 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288>).

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <<http://www.samstar.ru>> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <<http://www.sova-center.ru>>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468>.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>>.

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 Russia is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>>.

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