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CRIMEA: Raids, violence, threats - but what protection do victims get?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service

About 30 armed Russian security agency officers raided a madrassah (Islamic religious school) near the Crimean capital Simferopol on 24 June, Forum 18 News Service notes. The staff and students were from the Crimean Tatar minority. Three weeks earlier, a mob attacked a Kiev Patriarchate Ukrainian Orthodox Church and its congregation on a military base in Perevalnoe. The mob then changed the locks on the building to prevent it being used by the congregation. Jehovah's Witnesses have noted "a significant increase in violence" against them since March. One such attack resulted in Nikolai Martsenyuk (who was peacefully sharing his beliefs on the street) being kicked unconscious and needing hospital treatment. "Despite repeated calls on the emergency number, no police officer came to the scene of the offence," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Crimean authorities, including the Interior Ministry and Prosecutor's Office, have refused to tell Forum 18 what action police have taken to protect victims from threats and violence, and to identify and punish attackers.

About 30 armed officers from a number of Russian security agencies conducted an early-morning raid on a madrassah (Islamic religious school) close to the Crimean capital Simferopol on 24 June, Forum 18 News Service notes. The staff and students were from the Crimean Tatar minority. The raid appears to have been led by Russia's FSB security service. Three weeks earlier, a mob attacked a church of the Kiev Patriarchate Ukrainian Orthodox Church on a military base in Perevalnoe. The mob changed the locks and the congregation cannot now use the building.

Since March 2014, places of worship and individuals of some faiths (including followers of Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Kiev Patriarchate) have faced violent attacks, apparently without the perpetrators being identified and punished (see below). Attacks on Muslim and Kiev Patriarchate places of worship also took place before 2014, also without the perpetrators being identified and punished (see forthcoming F18News article).

The Kiev Patriarchate states that five of its ten priests in the region have been forced to leave Crimea amid threats, and that it has lost at least two of its churches. The government's Crimean Property Fund is also massively increasing the Patriarchate's rent for a building it uses as its cathedral in Simferopol (see forthcoming F18News article).

The Kiev Patriarchate - which emerged in the early 1990s - is the second largest Orthodox Church in Ukraine after the Moscow Patriarchate. However, the Kiev Patriarchate is not recognised as canonical by any other canonical Orthodox Church.

Life for Greek Catholic clergy from elsewhere in Ukraine has become more difficult. As Ukrainian citizens, they can stay for only three months at a time before being required to leave for at least a month (see forthcoming F18News article).

Annexation

Religious communities in Simferopol, Sevastopol, Yevpatoriya and Feodosiya - including Latin-rite Catholics and Protestants of various registered and unregistered affiliations - told Forum 18 in mid-June that their life has continued as before since Russia controversially annexed Crimea in March. Some communities appeared to be choosing their words carefully in their responses.

"During the change of leadership, there were questions," one Protestant pastor told Forum 18 on 23 June. "But there have been no negative consequences for us."

Russia now regards the Crimean peninsula as an integral part of Russia, but Ukraine and the international community do not recognise the peninsula as part of Russia. The peninsula is now divided between two Russian federal regions, the Republic of Crimea (with its capital in Simferopol) and the port city of Sevastopol. The city has equal status with two other federal cities, Moscow and St Petersburg.

Russia insists that Russian federal law - including the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offences - now applies in Crimea. This means that its inhabitants may fall foul of Russia's anti-"extremism" laws.

Many Islamic texts - including numerous translations of the writings of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi and the contemporary Istanbul Naqshbandi Sufi teacher Osman Nuri Topbas - as well as Jehovah's Witness publications have been banned in Russia as "extremist". Anyone who distributes or possesses such works risks criminal prosecution and punishment (see Forum 18's "extremism" Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1724>).

The Russian authorities have also established branches in Crimea of federal agencies, including the Justice Ministry and the FSB security service. However, many local officials appear to have been already in post before March and have simply had their posts transferred to the new authorities.

The Religious Affairs Department of the Culture Ministry in Simferopol declined to answer any questions by telephone on 25 June, referring Forum 18 to Culture Minister Vera Novoselskaya. Her number went unanswered the same day.

Raid

At about 6 am on 24 June, about 30 armed Russian security agency officers raided the madrassah in the village of Kolchugino (Bulganak in Crimean Tatar), some 20 kms west of Simferopol, according to Crimean news agency QHA and Radio Free Europe's Crimean Service. The madrassah - which is part of the Spiritual Administration of Crimean Muslims (the Muftiate) - teaches boys how to recite the Koran in Arabic.

Officers - some of them masked - were from Russia's FSB security service, OMON riot police, ordinary police, and Berkut (security units originally formed under Ukrainian Interior Ministry jurisdiction). Officers broke glass on windows and doors to gain entry to the building, where 13 teenage boys and two teachers were asleep.

Two Berkut officers "burst into the room with Kalashnikov automatic weapons and asked who was the oldest", 15-year-old madrassah student Emir Kurtametov told QHA later on 24 June. They also aimed a pistol at a student in a neighbouring room to force him to open the window to allow them in, he added.

Officers then interviewed madrassah Deputy Director Aider Osmanov. The entire premises - including Osmanov's private home next door - were searched over the following hours. Officers found no weapons or other dangerous items. They confiscated two computers and one unidentified book, and also took mobile phones from the boys and the teachers. Osmanov was taken away for questioning at the main police headquarters but was freed after 90 minutes of questioning, news agencies reported.

Another nearby home belonging to a woman named Sanie was also raided at 6 am by officers dressed in camouflage and men in civilian clothes. A search warrant was shown. Officers said they were looking for drugs, weapons "and some kind of extremist literature", she told QHA the same day. After a thorough three-hour search, officers left, taking photocopies of the family members' passports.

Officers told Muftiate officials who arrived at the madrassah that they were acting on the basis of a court decision on suspicion of extremism and storing of weapons, RFE's Crimean Service reported.

Crimean Deputy Mufti Esadullakh Bairov - who oversees religious education in the Muftiate - said officials had told them that they had not found anything that they were looking for during the search. "We're not hiding anything, it's open," he told RFE's Crimean Service. "It's not an underground school." He insisted that any search could have been done "in a more civilised manner".

No answers

The duty officer for the newly-formed Crimean branch of the FSB refused to tell Forum 18 on 24 June why the madrassah had been raided. "We have this information", he could be heard telling a colleague as they conferred. He then told Forum 18 to send its question in writing. Forum 18 had received no response to its written question by the middle of the working day in Crimea on 26 June.

The FSB duty officer declined to tell Forum 18 if he is a long-time resident of Crimea or had arrived in Crimea after March 2014.

The press office for the Crimean Interior Ministry - which oversees the police - refused to discuss the raid with Forum 18 on 25 June. "On this issue we recommend you to talk to the FSB," the press office told Forum 18 with no explanation. It refused to explain its role in the raid.

Mob attack

Early on Sunday 1 June, a mob of about 50 people prevented Fr Ivan Katkalo, a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kiev Patriarchate, from entering his church in a military base in the village of Perevalnoe in Simferopol District, local media reported. Demonstrators smashed the lock on the Church of the Protection of the Holy Mother of God and threw out items belonging to Fr

Ivan's congregation. A pregnant parishioner and Fr Ivan's daughter, who has cerebral palsy, were caught up in the mob attack.

The demonstrators then changed the lock to prevent the Kiev Patriarchate from gaining access to the building.

Fr Ivan told local media that he had appealed to the police, but they had failed to assist him, protect the community, or take action against the perpetrators.

"Fr Ivan has left Crimea for Canada," Archbishop Kliment (Kushch), head of the Kiev Patriarchate's Simferopol and Crimea Diocese, told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 25 June. "I've already lost that church."

A Greek Catholic place of worship is also on a former Ukrainian military base taken over by the Russian military. "People tried to close this church, saying it would be handed over to the Moscow Patriarchate", a member of the Greek Catholic Exarchate told Forum 18. "Thankfully this didn't happen."

First lost church

The first church of the Kiev Patriarchate lost was its only church in Sevastopol, St Kliment's Church, located on a Ukrainian military base. "When the Russians took over the base they threw us out. We were able to hold one last service there on Easter Sunday, 20 April." Archbishop Kliment said the parish had about 400 attendees at major festivals, with about 150 regular attendees each Sunday.

Five Kiev Patriarchate churches - including those in Perevalnoe and Sevastopol - have been forced to stop functioning. Most of the Patriarchate's eight surviving parishes are in small villages in northern Crimea.

Threats, violence

Five of the Kiev Patriarchate's ten priests in the region have already left Crimea since March, including Fr Ivan. All were Ukrainian citizens. "The authorities couldn't guarantee their security", Archbishop Kliment told Forum 18. "Some were told they'd be killed. They were threatened by phone, in writing, and face to face." He stated that complaints to the police and Prosecutor's Office were rejected. "They said we were the guilty ones."

Jehovah's Witnesses have similarly complained of "a significant increase in violence" against them since March. They told Forum 18 of threats or physical attacks in the village of Gaspra on 28 March, the village of Pionerskoe on 30 March and 2 April, Yalta on 28 April and Kerch on 9 May.

During the Yalta incident, an aggressive passer-by threatened to shoot Jehovah's Witness Nikolai Martsenyuk who, with a colleague, was peacefully offering Jehovah's Witness literature on the street. Martsenyuk tried to stop the man reaching for what he said was a pistol. The unknown man then pushed Martsenyuk to the ground and kicked him in the head, whereupon he lost consciousness. He had to be taken to hospital.

"Despite repeated calls on the emergency number, no police officer came to the scene of the offence," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "Only at the hospital was the victim questioned."

However, as with the other incidents of violence against Jehovah's Witnesses, Martsenyuk has not been informed that the police have taken any action.

The Press Secretary of the Crimean Interior Ministry has not stated what action the police have taken to protect victims from threats and violence, and to identify and punish attackers. Forum 18 asked for this information on 25 June, and no response has yet been received.

An official of the Crimean Prosecutor's Office refused to answer specific questions by phone on 25 June. However, she stressed that it is not within the competence of prosecutors to investigate or bring administrative or criminal cases. She referred Forum 18 to the police or the Investigative Committee. "But if anyone appeals to our office we are obliged to respond", she told Forum 18.

Forum 18 asked in writing the same day if any Jehovah's Witnesses or members of the Kiev Patriarchate had appealed to the Prosecutor's Office. No response had been received by the middle of the working day in Crimea on 26 June. (END)

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Crimea can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=86>.

A printer-friendly map of the disputed territory of Crimea, whose extent is not marked, can be found in the south-east of the map entitled 'Ukraine' http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Ukraine&ar_a=1.

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

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY