

19 August 2003

BULGARIA: Jehovah's Witness centre to be destroyed?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Reported new powers by the city authorities in Burgas to allow the destruction of new places of worship near schools could see a Jehovah's Witness centre now being built in the city be destroyed. The Burgas authorities "believe such places will influence children," Jehovah's Witness leader Peter Mischler told Forum 18 News Service. "This is ridiculous." But the deputy mayor responsible for religious affairs, Marusya Lyubcheva, told Forum 18 the Jehovah's Witnesses cannot build the centre because they do not have local registration and admitted there is popular opposition to the new centre. "Civil society has a problem with this building."

A new centre the Jehovah's Witnesses are building in the Black Sea port of Burgas might be destroyed in the wake of popular and city council opposition. "The city council adopted a law saying no places of worship can be built near schools. They believe such places will influence children," Jehovah's Witness leader Peter Mischler told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Sofia on 15 August. "This is ridiculous." The new law reportedly grants the council the power to pull down such buildings. But the deputy mayor of Burgas responsible for religious affairs insists the council is acting according to its procedures. "The Jehovah's Witnesses don't have registration with the city administration," Marusya Lyubcheva told Forum 18 from Burgas on 18 August. "Religious organisations must have registration to build."

Lyubcheva confirmed that there was organised popular opposition to the new Jehovah's Witness centre. "Civil society has a problem with this building." She said the Jehovah's Witnesses had filed papers to build a business centre. "But it is not," she declared, reporting that she had discovered it would be used for religious meetings. "The documents were therefore sent back to them."

However, she declined to answer any other of Forum 18's questions about the reported city law barring new places of worship near schools or whether the Jehovah's Witnesses could continue to construct their centre. "I don't believe you'll quote my words accurately." She then put the phone down.

Forum 18's repeated emailed requests to the Burgas city administration for information about the reported city law and the text of it went unanswered.

Krasimira Cherkezova, the city's chief engineer, said the Jehovah's Witnesses were given permission to build a business centre in the Slaveykov district last year. "But the use of offices as places of worship is not allowed," she told Forum 18 on 18 August. "For us there is no problem for them to construct the building. The use of it is another problem – and this is outside our competence." She stressed she was not a specialist on religion, but believed that only "legitimately registered" religious communities had the right to build places of worship. She declined to say what will happen to the Jehovah's Witness building now.

Mischler conceded that the Jehovah's Witnesses had gained building permission for an administrative building, but denied that also using such a building for courses, lectures and religious meetings violated the law. He also denied that local registration was necessary. "We already have national re-registration with the Sofia court under the new law, and that is valid for the whole country."

The Jehovah's Witnesses – who claim 1,300 adherents in Bulgaria – have faced restrictions on their activity by a number of local authorities in recent years. In Burgas a temporary tent they had been using was recently pulled down.

Mischler complained that opposition to the Burgas building had been led by the right-wing IMRO political party, which had formed a committee to oppose its construction. "Basically, they're against all other religions than the Orthodox Church." He said they had organised demonstrations against Islam and other religious communities. "We believe they've been initiating newspaper articles with lies against us," he told Forum 18. He added that although the Jehovah's Witnesses have faced restrictions from local authorities elsewhere in Bulgaria, they are at present facing such problems only in Burgas.

Mischler stressed that the Jehovah's Witnesses are keen to resolve the problems over the Burgas centre with the local authorities amicably. "The authorities were very nice to us until these problems began." He added that the police had come to defend the building during protests by opponents. "I don't personally think the council will order the destruction of the building," he told Forum 18. "It is not an illegal construction – we have a building permit and we are building according to the drawings."

He said that because of the organised protests, the Jehovah's Witnesses had been obliged to erect a fence around the already-completed foundations to try to prevent physical attacks. "Construction is continuing, but only slowly."

No-one was available for comment at the government's religious affairs directorate in Sofia on 18 August. An official said the director, Ivan Jeleu, was on holiday and no-one else could respond.

Many larger towns have an official who handles religious affairs. A Sofia-based expert on local government told Forum 18 on 18 August that local authorities have often restricted religious activity by minorities. "It depends on how the local authorities view the religious community," she said on condition of anonymity. "There were more of such cases in the 1990s, with local laws and regulations on religion."

In the wake of last year's controversial new religion law, which narrowly survived a constitutional court challenge in July (see F18News 21 July 2003), all religious groups with the exception of the Bulgarian Orthodox Patriarchate were required to re-register with the courts to retain legal status. They can also re-register on a local level with mayors' offices. Although this is supposed to be a technical matter, there are fears local registration applications could be subject to arbitrary refusal. Local registration has not been easy for the Jehovah's Witnesses in the wake of the new law. "Several towns are making an issue of this," Mischler complained.

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