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BELARUS: Baptist pastors fined

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

Forum 18 News Service has learnt of three separate incidents in which unregistered Baptist pastors have been fined for their work. All three were fined for "the creation and leadership of a religious organisation without registering its charter (statutes) in accordance with established procedure," which is punishable under the Belarusian administrative offences code. A spokeswoman for the pastors' Moscow-based union remarked to Forum 18 that the incidents "seem to be to do with" the 2002 Belarusian religion law, which outlaws systematic unregistered religious gatherings.

Baptist pastor Viktor Yevtyukhov was fined 82,500 Belarusian roubles (275 Norwegian kroner, 35 Euros or 40 US dollars) on 5 December 2003 for heading an unregistered congregation in the village of Zamoshye, Gomel (Homyel') region, the International Union of Baptist Churches informed Forum 18 News Service on 25 January. The average monthly salary in Belarus is estimated to be 128 US dollars (885 Norwegian kroner, 102 Euros, or 276,857 Belarusian roubles).

Oleg Kurnosov, the Union's pastor in the town of Dubrovno (Dubrowna), Vitebsk (Vitsyebsk) region, was similarly fined 16,500 Belarusian roubles (55 Norwegian kroner, 7 Euros or 8 US dollars) on 23 December, according to a 9 January statement also received by Forum 18. Pastor Oleg was conducting evening worship in his own home on 21 November when a local police officer, district executive committee official and district architect reportedly arrived at the house and demanded that he remove a "Prayer House" sign from its exterior wall. According to the Baptists' report, the pastor refused to comply, arguing that, even though it hung on a private house, the sign simply served as an invitation to all who wished to attend services.

On 21 April 2003 the International Union of Baptist Churches related how a municipal official and district police officer visited the Sunday morning service of its Vitebsk city congregation on 2 March and fined Pastor Konstantin Yeremeyev 25,000 Belarusian roubles (83 Norwegian kroner, 10 Euros or 12 US dollars) for failing to register his congregation.

All three pastors were fined under Article 193 of the Belarusian administrative offences code, which punishes "the creation and leadership of a religious organisation without registering its charter (statutes) in accordance with established procedure."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 17 January, a spokeswoman for the Moscow-based Union remarked that the recent incidents in Belarus "seem to be to do with" the republic's 2002 law on religion, which states categorically that registration is compulsory for all religious communities.

Originally formed in 1961, the International Union of Baptist Churches adheres to a rigid principle of separation of church and state, according to which none of its current 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union are registered. The Union spokeswoman explained to Forum 18 that all these congregations would have to be able to evangelise completely freely throughout the former Soviet Union before their ruling body would agree to state registration.

Speaking to Forum 18 in Vitebsk on 23 September 2003, the region's official in charge of religious affairs confirmed that the unregistered activity of the Union of Baptist Churches was illegal in Belarus. "I tried to talk to them, but they have existed like that for three decades," Nikolai Stepanenko lamented. While they thus appear to be outside the law, the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk numbers the Union's communities in Belarus at 29.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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