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RUSSIA: Local restrictions on mission in Sakhalin region

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

Local religious believers in Sakhalin region sometimes face state restrictions on sharing their faith, Forum 18 News Service has found. Pentecostals have been banned from showing the 'Jesus Film', and have also encountered local state bans on open-air evangelism, whilst the Jehovah's Witnesses have faced obstacles in distributing their literature. One official told Forum 18 that unregistered religious groups "can meet in private flats but not attract other people or disturb those around them."

State restrictions on sharing a person's faith are sometimes keenly felt by local believers in the Far Eastern Russian region of Sakhalin, Forum 18 News Service has found. However, these restrictions are not so strict as those imposed on foreigners (see F18News 16 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=342).

In January 2004, members of Sakhalin's regional Pentecostal union were forbidden from showing the Jesus Film on the Kurile island of Iturup (some 300km from the Russian border with northern Japan), according to the union's bishop, Petr Yarmolyuk. The Pentecostals had already advertised the screening, which was to be held at the main town's house of culture, Yarmolyuk explained to Forum 18 in the regional capital, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, on 24 April. "But then the head of the local department of culture said that we were not allowed to show the film, and the chairwoman of the town council told us to leave the island." While no reason was given for the decision on that occasion, he said, state officials generally cite a decree issued by Sakhalin's late governor, Igor Farkhutdinov, "but I've never seen it."

The regional decree in question appears to be one on missionary activity issued on 4 July 1996, which then vice-governor Magdalina Sklyarenko cites in a 27 March 1997 letter to Sakhalin's regional cultural department. In the letter, a copy of which has been seen by Forum 18, Sklyarenko writes that the use by Jehovah's Witnesses of a state creative arts centre in the port of Kholmsk (approximately 40km west of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk) is unlawful since, according to the decree, "missionary religious activity is permitted only in worship buildings."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 1 June, Sakhalin's regional religious affairs official, Natalya Oreshkova, said that she was unaware of the Iturup incident, but thought that it was "very possible" that the Pentecostals could have been barred from renting the house of culture there. Remarking that local authorities "do not welcome" religious events in cultural establishments or schools, Oreshkova was unable to confirm the existence of a local decree preventing them from taking place, however.

On the main island of Sakhalin, Pentecostals have mixed fortunes in the area of mission. While Russia's 1994 law on demonstrations stipulates that organisers of public gatherings are obliged merely to inform the state authorities in advance about their plans, Yarmolyuk remarked to Forum 18 that "this amounts to obtaining permission in practice." He emphasised that his Pentecostal union – 40 of whose 65 congregations are registered – enjoys positive relations with the municipal authorities in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk: "Our members are granted free use of a public park for events on Saturdays, for example." Elsewhere on the island, however, "the old Soviet mentality" results in Pentecostals being barred from public evangelisation, he remarked.

In an interview with Forum 18 in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on 21 April, Pastor Roman Filippov of the town's independent Victory Chapel Pentecostal Church also claimed that, despite the requirements of the federal law on demonstrations, "it means getting permission for events in reality." He said that the official in charge of registering religious organisations at the regional department of justice was annoyed when she saw Victory Chapel members conducting a street concert in the early summer of 2003, and summoned him for questioning, "even though they are in charge of organisations with legal personality status, and we are unregistered." According to Filippov, the official maintained that Victory Chapel needed permission to hold such events and threatened to bar the group from future registration. (Founded in 2000, as an independent entity Victory Chapel must wait 15 years before being registered as a legal personality under Russia's 1997 religion law.)

Also in the summer of 2003, the same official instructed Victory Chapel to obtain her approval for the content of its posters advertising Christian film screenings, claimed Filippov, while local police summoned him for questioning about the church's basis for distributing flyers. On hearing this, another young church member commented to Forum 18 that representatives of a printing firm

where Victory Chapel previously produced its posters and flyers suddenly refused the group's custom at approximately the same time. "When we asked why, they just said, 'You know the reasons.'"

In 2003 Victory Chapel was also forced to remove its sign from outside the hostel where Filippov rents a ground-floor room for services after Tamara Sadykova, an official dealing with relations with the public in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk's municipal registration, asked the town's architectural and construction department whether the sign complied with relevant regulations. Filippov admitted to Forum 18 that it did not – "it hadn't been approved and we weren't supposed to have it, as we don't have legal personality status." He pointed out, however, that "no one usually bothers about such things." While Sadykova states in her 14 February 2003 letter to the architectural department that Victory Chapel exists as a religious group in line with Russia's 1997 religion law, she continues that "we are concerned by the fact that they have deployed an active advertising campaign to draw young people into their ranks." Curiously using the very same phraseology, local newspaper "Sakhalinskaya Zhizn" on 27 March 2003 attributed this concern to local citizens when reporting the removal of the sign.

Natalya Oreshkova confirmed to Forum 18 that religious organisations are supposed to inform the local authorities about open-air events, which, she maintained, constituted obtaining permission. Unregistered religious groups, however, are not permitted to hold such events or distribute literature, she said: "they can meet in private flats but not attract other people or disturb those around them."

While Article 7 of the 1997 law states that a religious group is formed "for the goals of joint confession and dissemination of its faith," its rights are stipulated as carrying out religious ceremonies and teaching religion to its own followers. Under Article 27, such a group is explicitly not allowed to distribute religious literature.

Pastor Roman Filippov also maintained to Forum 18 that, while the Sakhalin authorities restrict Victory Chapel's access to the public sphere in the ways described above, their opponents are given a platform from which to air their views in the local state media (See F18News 18 March 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=8). During April 2003 a newspaper founded by the regional administration, "Gubernskiye Vedomosti", published full-page anti-cult articles in three separate issues, one of which accused Victory Chapel's pastor of psychological manipulation of the church's members.

Bishop Petr Yarmolyuk similarly told Forum 18 that his congregations have "practically no access to the local media." While the state-run Sakhalin radio airs its own 20-minute Orthodox programme every week, the Pentecostal union would have to pay the commercial rate for air-time of 3,000 roubles (694 Norwegian kroner, 84 Euros or 103 US dollars) per minute, he said. On 25 May, however, Pastor Choi Sin Chur of Sakhalin's Korean Baptist church told Forum 18 that his community had not encountered any obstacle to airing religious programmes on Sakhalin's Korean-language radio station. (Approximately six per cent of islanders are Korean, although most speak only Russian.) The Baptists had sponsored a journalist at the radio station instead of paying set rates for air-time, he said.

Interviewed in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on 23 April, Jehovah's Witness elder Yevgeni Yelin told Forum 18 that state opposition to his community's activity has centred upon its worship building rather than mission in recent years (See subsequent F18News article). Previously, however, a March 1997 department of justice decree (later successfully overturned) annulled the Jehovah's Witnesses' registration, partly because the organisation's 1993 charter describes the area of its activity to be Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and its adjoining settlements, "whereas members of the community hold meetings not only in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, but in Dolinsk, Kholmsk, Aleksandrovsk-Sakhalinsk and other towns." On 20 January 1998 one member of the community, Dmitri Snovidov, was fined a small amount of money by People's Judge Kuznetsov for distributing Jehovah's Witness literature in Nogliki settlement (500km north of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk).

In defence of the fine and confiscation of the literature, the region's public prosecutor reasoned that Russia's 1997 religion law "accords the right to distribute literature to religious organisations," but there is no registered Jehovah's Witness community in the Nogliki area. (END)

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

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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

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