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BULGARIA: Police raid Orthodox churches

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Bulgarian police have forcibly expelled members of the alternative Orthodox synod from some 250 churches they have been using for over 10 years, causing deep concern in Bulgaria, although one government official has defended the expulsions to Forum 18 News Service. The police raids follow a long-standing split in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and a controversial religion law favouring one side in the split. Baptist pastor Theodor Angelov, general secretary of the European Baptist Federation, was blunt in his support for the ousted Orthodox parishes. "We have full sympathy for our Orthodox brothers and sisters. This is a very difficult moment for all the Churches and the whole population of Bulgaria." He told Forum 18 that he condemned what he regarded as communist-style methods not seen in Bulgaria since the end of the communist period. "Using violence in a time that pretends to be democratic is unacceptable."

Human rights and religious freedom activists have condemned the forcible expulsion on 21 July of members of the alternative Orthodox synod from some 250 churches they have been using for more than a decade since the Orthodox Church split in the early 1990s. "This is a brutal violation of the religious rights of Bulgarian priests and people," Emil Cohen, head of the religious freedom group the Tolerance Foundation, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Sofia on 23 July. "It is the most serious violation of religious rights in Bulgaria in the recent past." But Professor Ivan Jelev, director of the Religious Affairs Directorate of the Council of Ministers, defended the expulsions. "These churches belong to the Bulgarian Orthodox Patriarchate," he told Forum 18 the same day. "These others separated from the Orthodox Church, so they have no right to use Orthodox Church property. That's why the police ousted them."

A decade after the split in the Orthodox Church, some 250 of Bulgaria's estimated 600 Orthodox churches were in the hands of the alternative synod, led by Metropolitan Inokenty. The rest remained with Patriarch Maksim, who is recognised as the canonical leader by the rest of the Orthodox world despite the alternative synod's claims that his election as patriarch in 1971 was uncanonical because it was decided by the then communist government.

The raids, which began early on 21 July, were carried out by police in Sofia, Plovdiv, Smolian, Bansko, Chepelare, and other places across Bulgaria with a prosecutor's warrant. Some members of the alternative synod have demanded the resignation of the country's chief prosecutor Nikola Filchev and interior minister Georgi Petkanov.

Condemning the seizure of the churches was Ivan Gruikin, the lawyer representing the alternative synod led by Metropolitan Inokenty and head of the Bulgarian Lawyers' Association. "The main responsibility lies with the government, which works with the prosecutor's office," he told Forum 18 from Sofia on 23 July. "The order to seize the churches was taken by prosecutors, not by a judge. The prosecutors are trying to play the role of judges."

Gruikin is particularly concerned by the level of police violence, citing more than ten priests and more than 100 laypeople attacked in churches in Sofia alone. He is also concerned about the police detention of Fr Khristo Piserov. "The police want to keep him in prison without giving any reasons," he complained. Also initially detained were Fr Kamen Barakov and Bishop Gevrasly of St Paraskeva Church in Sofia, as well as the secretary of the church, Milena Shtereva, but they have been freed.

The government has favoured Maksim's synod in recent years, adopting in 2002 a controversial religion law that gave the Patriarchate automatic registration while requiring all other faiths to register. The law also gave the Patriarchate automatic ownership of all Orthodox property in Bulgaria, a move that aroused great concern among religious freedom activists and members of the alternative synod (see F18News 21 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=108).

Government favouritism towards the Patriarchate has even extended abroad. A member of the Bulgarian Orthodox community in The Hague in the Netherlands complained to the Standart newspaper in June that the Religious Affairs Directorate in Sofia refused to support them in finding money to rent a place to hold services. When the priest asked the Directorate for help, it replied that help would not be forthcoming unless the parish joined the Patriarchate. It refused to do so.

Jelev of the Religious Affairs Directorate insisted that the conflict between the synods led by Patriarch Maksim and Metropolitan Inokenty was not an internal split. "They left the Orthodox Church – they were only a very small part of the clergy. They are a

separate community," he told Forum 18. "They are free to work further as a Church – no-one is stopping them, provided they use their own property." However, he declined to explain why the state was intervening in the dispute or why it backed Patriarch Maksim, putting the phone down.

Theodor Angelov, a Baptist pastor and general secretary of the European Baptist Federation, was blunt in his support for the ousted Orthodox parishes. "We have full sympathy for our Orthodox brothers and sisters," he told Forum 18 from Sofia on 23 July. "This is a very difficult moment for all the Churches and the whole population of Bulgaria." Describing the police violence as "unpleasant", he condemned what he regarded as communist-style methods not seen in Bulgaria since the end of the communist period. "Using violence in a time that pretends to be democratic is unacceptable."

He complained of what he saw as the government interference in church affairs. "It is old-style communist thinking that the state should interfere in what should happen within religious communities," he told Forum 18. He was highly critical of what he saw as the failure to use proper judicial process. "The police arrived at churches across the country at six o'clock in the morning, sealing them, dragging out priests by force if they are inside and in some cases beating them – there's nothing legal in that."

Angelov said that while other religious minorities have encountered some problems with places of worship, most obstructions have been from the local authorities, often under pressure from Orthodox priests. "There's been nothing to compare with what's happening now to Metropolitan Inokenty and his followers." (See F18News 19 August 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=124).

Emil Cohen of the Tolerance Foundation argues that the government's move was not about property. "This is just an excuse for the government's brutal measures," he told Forum 18. "There is a problem over Orthodox property, but this should be resolved by the courts, not by police evicting people from churches. The state have been taking Maksim's side only."

Gruikin said many priests and laypeople attacked by the police are lodging complaints with the prosecutor's office. "Many people want to defend their rights, but the problem is that the prosecutor's office is defending Maksim and his synod," he told Forum 18. "So people have little hope they will do much." He said that they will continue their case as far as the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

A printer-friendly map of Bulgaria is available from

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

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY