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RUSSIA: Why did police raid Pentecostal church?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Twenty masked special and plain clothes police raided an evening seminar on 14 April at the Word of Faith church in Izhevsk, the capital of the Udmurtia autonomous republic. Police forced the 70 people present outside, calling them "sectarians" and "prostitutes", while they searched the church. Nearly 50 church members were held for five hours at the police station and fingerprinted. Udmurtia's interior ministry claimed the Pentecostals had "distorted" details of the raid. Pentecostal bishop Yuri Degtyar told Forum 18 News Service from Izhevsk that he believes the public prosecutor has now "taken control of the situation" and that the investigation into police conduct during the raid will be "objective".

Pentecostal bishop Yuri Degtyar has told Forum 18 News Service that he believes a criminal investigation by the public prosecutor of Udmurtia into police behaviour during a 14 April raid on his 2,000-strong Work of Faith Church will be "objective". "The public prosecutor's response was pro-active," he declared on 21 April from Izhevsk, capital of the autonomous republic some 1,130 kilometres (700 miles) east of Moscow. "They have taken control of the situation."

On 19 April the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice had questioned how, before the investigation had even started, Udmurtia public prosecutor Boris Sarnayev could announce to the press that "no police action aimed at humiliating people on religious grounds has been established".

Twenty masked special and plain clothes police officers burst into premises owned by its affiliate church, Word of Faith, on the evening of 14 April, breaking through a side-gate even though the main gates were open, the national Pentecostal union headed by Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky reported in a statement on 15 April. Shouting "Quick! We'll break your legs!" the officers directing the operation (one of whom was said to be drunk and brandishing a pistol) reportedly forced the approximately 70 people present, including pastors, worshippers and seminar participants, to stand facing an outside wall for approximately half an hour while both they and the building were searched. According to the union, the officers told Pastor Mikhail Russkikh that no search warrant was required after 6pm and repeatedly called church members "sectarians" and "prostitutes", before detaining 46 of those present in a single cell at the local police station for approximately five hours.

Interrogated individually, continued the statement, the detainees were all fingerprinted and photographed, some were told to sign blank witness statements and one was hit when he refused to answer questions. No formal police charges were reportedly made.

On 18 April the Interfax news agency reported a spokesman for Udmurtia's department of the Interior Ministry (which includes the police force) as insisting that the Pentecostal union had "distorted" events and vowing that his department would file suit against "a number of organisations and citizens" circulating information about the incident in the media if it proved unconfirmed by the public prosecutor's investigation.

Asked on 21 April how precisely the Pentecostal union statement had distorted events, a press spokesman at Udmurtia's Interior Ministry department directed Forum 18 to an 18 April statement on the Udmurtia state authorities' official website. This maintained that an Izhevsk district public prosecutor had issued a warrant for an urgent search of the church's premises in connection with the 9 April discovery not far from the building of a murdered man. The statement also claimed that both the murdered man and a man accused of the murder had lived at the church's premises from 2003 onwards. The murderer had placed his victim's possessions at the church's premises, continued the statement, and told police that a number of people with previous convictions lived there without registration. This, it stated, was what had led to the 14 April search and detention of 46 people, against 22 of whom administrative charges were brought for not having registration. (Russian citizens are required by law to register at any locality where they stay for more than 90 days.)

Bishop Degtyar insisted that in fact only 12 people present at the church's premises on 14 April did not have registration, being participants in Word of Faith's ex-convict rehabilitation project. "These twelve are people with difficult pasts trying to change their lives," he told Forum 18. "This was the only administrative violation, but it doesn't warrant police in masks scaring us all - there are civilised ways of conducting searches." In addition, he said, no mention of the murder investigation was made until several days after the search, and no one was questioned about it during the police interrogation. "The questions were rather: 'Why do you go to this church and not an Orthodox church?', 'How much money do you donate to your church?'"

In a statement published on the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice website on 19 April, Bishop Degtyar also explains that the man accused of the murder had last been seen at the church's rehabilitation centre approximately 18 months ago, and that the church had unfortunately not known that he was using a false identity or was wanted by police in other parts of the country, "otherwise we would have turned him in to the law-enforcement agencies ourselves." The murder victim had also not been seen at the centre for a long time, maintained the statement.

Work of Faith Church runs a number of social projects assisting the homeless, orphans and low-income families in addition to former convicts. "We are working to change society for the better," Bishop Degtyar told Forum 18. "We want it to be healthy and strong."

One night in July 2001, Dmitry Mafenko, then leader of the church's anti-drugs project, was kidnapped together with his assistant Pavel, and the pair have not been found since. While acknowledging that local drug dealers are opposed to the church's activity, Bishop Degtyar stressed to Forum 18 that there was no connection between this kidnapping and the 14 April raid, which he put down to "local police arbitrariness". The church has previously had no conflict with the police, he added: "We pray for the authorities - the incident was completely unexpected, and many people are still in shock about it."

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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