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RUSSIA: Salvation Army officers denied entry "in the interests of state security"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Two British and Danish Salvation Army officers have been denied entry to Russia "in the interests of state security," Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Colonel Barry Pobjie told Forum 18 at the Church's Moscow headquarters that "the accusations are ludicrous – this is directed not against these individuals but the organisation as a whole," he maintained, pointing out that both officers had previously worked and travelled extensively in Russia for several years. The two were traveling to a congress celebrating the elevation in the status of the Salvation Army's operation covering Russia, Georgia, Moldova, Romania and Ukraine from "Command" to "Territory". This allows greater independence from the Church's London headquarters. Five foreign Catholic clergy were denied entry to Russia in 2002, following a similar internal decision to elevate the status of its four apostolic administrations to dioceses. Meanwhile, German Lutheran Bishop Siegfried Springer, the head of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in European Russia who was recently denied entry to Russia, has been told he can make one brief return visit. No reason was given for the annulment of his multi-entry visa.

Two high-ranking British and Danish Salvation Army officers were denied invitations to enter Russia in March "in the interests of state security," Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "If this is an official policy of opposition driven from above, it doesn't speak well of the nation as a whole," Colonel Barry Pobjie remarked to Forum 18 at the Church's Moscow headquarters on 26 April. "The Russian people are the victims – the Salvation Army and other churches play a vital role alongside the state authorities in tackling the Aids epidemic here, as well as the trafficking of women and child homelessness. These issues are so great that we would like to think all assistance would be welcomed."

Colonel Pobjie categorically rejected all possibility that Major Robert Garrad and Colonel Karl Lydholm might pose a threat to Russian state security, describing them as "two very fine Salvation Army officers" serving respectively as the personal secretary to the Salvation Army's highest ranking officer and co-ordinator of the Church's work in Finland and Norway. "The accusations are ludicrous – this is directed not against these individuals but the organisation as a whole," he maintained to Forum 18, pointing out that both officers had previously worked and travelled extensively in Russia for several years without any impediment whatsoever.

In September 2000 another Salvation Army officer, Canadian citizen Geoff Ryan, was denied an entry visa to Russia without explanation and has not returned since. The Salvation Army in Kalmykia, in south-eastern European Russia, where he worked, was described in the local state press as "western spies" and "one of the most powerful totalitarian sects in the world" and foreign missionaries from the Salvation Army and other Protestant organisations were refused entry (see F18News 14 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=31).

Dated 22 March 2005 and viewed by Forum 18, two letters from the Moscow city department of Russia's Interior Ministry explain that both Garrad and Lydholm were denied visa invitations under Article 27, Part 1 of the federal law on entry to and exit from Russia, in accordance with which a foreign citizen may be denied permission to enter the country "in the interests of state security". The official commentary to the law adds that such a decision is to be taken, in particular, if there is evidence that the foreigner concerned "belongs to an international terrorist organisation or organised crime network, has links with extremist or criminal organisations in Russia or foreign secret services, or intends to commit a crime in Russia".

When there was no response to the Salvation Army's mid-February visa invitation applications submitted in Moscow, Colonel Lydholm applied independently for a tourist visa from Finland at the beginning of March, but received his passport back from the Russian Embassy in Helsinki with a stamp showing that he was barred. He is now pursuing the matter through the Danish Foreign Ministry, Pobjie told Forum 18, while the Salvation Army is currently still deliberating its official response as an organisation to the rejections. He added that the two officers were due to stay in Moscow for only several days in order to attend a church congress on 12 March, and that, while there was an unusual delay, other foreign visitors - including Lydholm's wife - were able to attend the event: "She wasn't seen as a threat."

While not attributing any significance to the 12 March congress, Colonel Pobjie mentioned that it was to celebrate an elevation in the status of the Salvation Army's operation covering Russia, Georgia, Moldova, Romania and Ukraine from "Command" to

"Territory". A purely internal change allowing greater independence from the Church's London headquarters in financial and personnel matters, this decision was made on 1 December 2004 but became operable on 1 March 2005, he added: "I don't know how the Russian authorities could have known about it."

Five foreign Catholic clergy were denied entry to Russia in the course of several months in 2002 after the Catholic Church in Russia made a similar internal decision to elevate the status of its four apostolic administrations to dioceses. Currently, the visa situation of foreign Catholic clergy is best described as mixed (see F18News 23 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=461).

Despite an unsuccessful attempt to liquidate the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army by the state authorities in the Russian capital in 2000-2, Colonel Pobjie also told Forum 18 that relations with them have since been "warm, cordial and helpful," with the rejections coming "completely out of the blue".

However, while a 2002 Constitutional Court decision prevents the Moscow branch from being liquidated, it has still not been re-registered in line with Russia's 1997 religion law, Anatoli Pchelintsev of the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice told Forum 18 on 28 April. "The Russian authorities argue that this is impossible because the re-registration deadline expired at the end of 2000," he explained.

On 1 July 2004 the European Court of Human Rights declared admissible a case filed against Russia by the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army in 2001. While the Church would prefer to settle the affair without turning to Strasbourg, Colonel Pobjie stressed to Forum 18, the Salvation Army is anxious to overturn accusations contained in a July 2000 Moscow district court decision that it is a "militarised organisation" with "barrack-room discipline": "We were considered for the Nobel Peace Prize once or twice – I think our name is worth defending."

While those accusations are outstanding, continued Pobjie, the Salvation Army is unable to challenge the 2002 publication of a Moscow school textbook, "The Basics of Living Safely", which draws upon the July 2000 local court verdict. Endorsed by Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, the textbook's chapter on terrorism counts the Salvation Army among "pseudo-religious organisations seeking all possible methods of using the Russian education system to spread their so-called religious teachings". "Posing as an evangelical Protestant Church," it continues, "the Salvation Army is in essence a militarised formation with a strictly hierarchical system, military ranks, uniforms and commands, as well as unflinching subordination of juniors to seniors."

Meanwhile, German Lutheran Bishop Siegfried Springer, the head of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in European Russia who was recently denied entry to Russia (see F18News 18 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=545), has been told he can make a brief return visit after the General Synod of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States wrote to President Vladimir Putin calling for his return. Bishop Springer told Forum 18 from the German town of Bad Sooden-Allendorf on 4 May that the German embassy in Moscow and the Russian consulate in Berlin both indicated on 28 April that the Russian authorities would grant him a one-week visa. "They also intimated that a decision would be taken at the end of May as to whether I will then be given a one-year visa, although there is no firm promise of this yet." He has now applied for a one-week visa for mid-May.

Bishop Springer is unhappy that Russian officials have still not told him why his valid one-year visa was abruptly annulled at Moscow's Domodedovo airport on 10 April. "I keep asking for the reason, as I don't want to get a new visa without knowing this," he told Forum 18. "Otherwise a shadow will remain on me and my office - I want truth and clarity."

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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