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RUSSIA: How many missionaries now denied visas?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

While Moscow-based religious rights lawyer Anatoli Pchelintsev believes the number of foreign religious workers barred from Russia is rising, this is difficult to corroborate as many prefer not to report visa denials, Forum 18 News Service has found. Catholic bishop Clemens Pickel told Forum 18 that the denial of a new visa to Fr Janusz Blaut in October 2004 after ten years in Russia (the eighth such Catholic visa denial) has left his Vladikavkaz parish without a priest. Yet Lutheran bishop Siegfried Springer and Protestant overseer Hugo Van Niekerk – both denied visas this summer – have once more been granted them. Of the 52 excluded religious workers since 1998 known to Forum 18 – whether Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist or Mormon – only a handful have been allowed to return to Russia. Officials and the media have often stoked fears of "religious expansion" which, they argue, represents a threat to Russia's "national security".

Despite being invited by registered local religious communities, foreign religious workers may still be denied entry to Russia, Forum 18 News Service has found. Moscow-based religious rights lawyer Anatoli Pchelintsev estimated to Forum 18 in April 2005 that the number of foreign religious workers barred from Russia was rising, although this is difficult to corroborate as many missionaries prefer not to report visa denials. Those already barred are still unable to return, even if they lead religious communities within Russia, such as Pastor Aleksei Ledyayev, the overall leader of congregations of the charismatic New Generation Church who is based in Latvia, or Baptist pastor Dan Pollard, who has led his church in Russia's Far East from the United States since being barred from the country in May 1999.

The absence of foreign religious workers is keenly felt by local religious communities. Speaking to Forum 18 in June, for example, Saratov-based Catholic bishop Clemens Pickel lamented the lack of a parish priest in North Ossetia after Polish citizen Fr Janusz Blaut was denied a new visa in October 2004: "I can't find a priest for Vladikavkaz – it's too far to send someone every Sunday, and it's only 20km (12 miles) from Beslan. I can't send an inexperienced young Russian, or a new foreign priest either." Fr Blaut – the most recent foreign Catholic cleric to be excluded from Russia – had worked in North Ossetia for ten years.

A few foreign religious workers have been able to overturn their bans, however. On 5 September a secretary at the Moscow administration of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in European Russia told Forum 18 that its German bishop Siegfried Springer, who was deported in April 2005 (see F18News 4 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=555), has since been granted a new one-year multi-entry visa. Also on 5 September, a secretary at the St Petersburg-based Association of Christian Churches in Russia told Forum 18 that one of its overseers, the South African Hugo Van Niekerk, who oversees 80 evangelical communities in central and southern Russia, was denied a visa in July 2005 but has since managed to return by changing the religious organisation inviting him.

Revered by Buddhists as the ninth Bogdodogen, or spiritual leader of Mongolia, Jetsun Dhampa Rinpoche was denied a visa in July 2000 but has since made visits to Russia in 2003, 2004 and 2005.

Earlier exclusions

Following Pollard's 1999 ban – the first to be documented – the trend in such exclusions reached a peak in 2002. The expulsion from Russia of five Catholic clergy in that year alone brought the total number of documented cases to 33, and attracted strong international criticism. On 7 November 2002, a group of Helsinki Commission members and US congressmen wrote to Russian president Vladimir Putin expressing their "growing concern over the pattern of denial or cancellation of visas for foreign religious workers of minority faiths." The group also urged "the establishment of a policy which will ensure the full respect for the right of these religious communities to select, appoint and replace their personnel in accordance with their requirements and standards," and pointed out that "artificial impediments imposed by federal authorities that prevent foreign religious workers from taking up their clerical responsibilities in the Russian Federation ultimately undermine the rights of individuals from these faiths to practice their religion."

Since that letter, however, Forum 18 has obtained details of a further 12 cases, in addition to another seven previously undocumented expulsions occurring prior to November 2002. (A complete list of foreign religious workers barred from Russia to date whose details are known to Forum 18 is given below.) Moscow-based lawyer Sergei Sychev told Forum 18 in April 2005 that

he investigated 12 instances of foreign religious workers denied entry to Russia in 2003 – all Protestant - but stopped recording them in 2004. If the authorities maintain that the foreigner concerned has been excluded "in the interests of state security" under Article 27, Part 1 of the federal law on entry to and exit from Russia – as is usual if a reason is given at all – he or she is normally reluctant to challenge the decision in court for fear of damaging the religious organisations which invited them, he added. Under the 1997 federal religion law, local religious organisations hold "the exclusive right" to invite foreign religious workers to the Russian Federation.

Editor of the Alabama-based East-West Church and Ministry Report, Mark Elliott reported in autumn 2003 that he was aware of 53 cases of foreign religious workers who had been denied entry to Russia in addition to the 33 documented by November 2002. (For further details of some of the cases listed below, see F18News 28 November 2003

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=198, 16 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=342 and http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=343, 18 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=545 and 4 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=555).

Most of the foreign religious workers barred from Russia since the late 1990s have not been able to return. His visa revoked in April 2002, Irkutsk-based Polish Catholic bishop Jerzy Mazur has since been replaced by Belarusian Cyryl Klimowicz, who does not require a visa to enter Russia. Denied entry in August 2002, Slovak Catholic priest Fr Stanislav Krajnak reportedly received a visa in 2004 but was summoned back to the Russian embassy within hours for it to be cancelled. According to Sergei Sychev, Irkutsk-based US Pentecostal Victor Barousse was denied a visa even after successfully challenging his August 2002 application rejection in court. While Dan Pollard's five-year entry ban has expired, Khabarovsk region's religious affairs official told Forum 18 that he would not be able to return to his Pacific coast church due to new limitations on foreign citizens residing within 5km (3 miles) of federal borders (see F18News 16 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=343).

Previously barred from Russia for several years, the fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso was permitted a very brief pastoral visit to the traditionally Buddhist republic of Kalmykia in late 2004. However, asked whether he had been invited again in 2005 and if so what the state authorities' response had been, a spokesman at Moscow's Tibetan Centre told Forum 18 on 5 September that Russian Buddhists "invite His Holiness every year. All I can say is that there won't be a visit this year."

Both Sergei Sychev and Svetlana Belova, who deals with invitations and visa applications for foreign religious workers at the Moscow-based evangelical Association for Spiritual Renewal, told Forum 18 that foreign religious workers found it particularly difficult to enter Russia following a switch in the body handling visa applications from the Foreign Ministry to the Interior Ministry at the end of 2002. "The Interior Ministry wouldn't give us multi-entry visas for eight months because the invitations were from a religious organisation," Belova told Forum 18 in March 2005. This situation was resolved by mid-2004, she added, and the Association has never had a foreign religious worker be denied a visa.

Belova did point out, however, that the Interior Ministry takes longer to process applications, a maximum of five visas may be applied for on any one day and that, whereas Foreign Ministry officials would take immediate decisions, "everything now has to be approved at the top, even if the official dealing with the application is of a perfectly competent rank to decide". A religious worker from New Zealand recently reported to Forum 18 a 40-day processing period for an invitation to visit a Protestant church in the Russian Far East. Both Sychev and Catholic representatives (see F18News 23 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=461) reported one improvement in mid-2004, however: the routine allocation of six- rather than three-month visas to foreign religious workers.

Religious "expansion" a "threat to national security"

While it predated his leadership, the trend in missionary expulsions has become more pronounced since Putin came to power in Russia. One of the first documents Putin signed on becoming acting president in January 2000 was a new national security policy, which cited "cultural-religious expansion of neighbouring states into Russian territory" among the threats to national interests and security, and called for "the counteraction of the negative influence of foreign religious organisations and missionaries." In addition, an October 2002 draft state report on methods of counteracting religious extremism expressed concern about the activity of branches of foreign religious organisations, which, while formally operating within the law, "often give rise to religious tensions." Mission by the Catholic Church was cited as one such cause, as well as the growing influence of some Protestant organisations, which, "under the guise of providing humanitarian aid, develop self-alienation from the Russian state among various sectors of the population – particularly in border areas."

Following last year's change of regime in Ukraine, such concern appears to be growing. Simply by advocating human rights and social justice, according to Sychev, Protestant churches are automatically viewed as opponents by the state authorities in some Russian regions. Commenting on a local evangelical missionary initiative in Pravda Severo-Zapada newspaper in May of this year, a spokeswoman for Arkhangelsk regional department of the FSB security police maintained: "Experience shows that this type of religious project is usually used as a cover for activity by the secret services of foreign states." In an August interview with Radonezh Orthodox radio station, Fr Vsevolod Chaplin, the assistant head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, called on Orthodox citizens to unite against a Ukrainian-style Orange Revolution, predicting that Russians would take a more sober view of such a phenomenon, "just as they have towards the flood of missionaries-sectarians into our country. It is

now clear to everyone that that was a political method of destroying the country."

Russian Protestant communities in particular are clearly coming under pressure for their foreign ties. In an interview with Interfax state news agency in June, Pentecostal bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky remarked: "Someone is intentionally firing up passions in order to turn Protestants into the Fifth Column, a tool of the Orange Revolution. But any such provocation is doomed to failure, as we Russian Protestants are patriots of our country, we are people with particular respect for the Russian authorities and the president of Russia. At the height of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, I spoke out to warn both Protestants and the Orthodox Church, who had allowed themselves to get caught up in political activity."

Foreign religious workers barred from Russia

This list gives the following details, where known to Forum 18, of foreign religious workers barred from Russia: Date of non-admittance to the Russian Federation, Name, Confession, Citizenship, Particular area of activity in the Russian Federation (if any), Method of non-admittance to the Russian Federation.

April 1999 Warren Wagner, Evangelical, US, Udmurtia, Visa denied

May 1999 Dan Pollard, Baptist, US, Khabarovsk Krai, Visa denied

September 1999 Charles Landreth, Church of Christ, US, Volgograd, Visa revoked

October 1999 Pastor Eberhard Behrens, Lutheran, German, Volgograd, Visa revoked

June 2000 David Binkley, Church of Christ, US, Magadan, Visa revoked

June 2000 Junsei Terasawa, Buddhist, Japanese, Visa denied

July 2000 Bogdo-Gegen Jetsun Dhampa Rinpoche IX, Buddhist, Tibetan refugee status, Visa denied

September 2000 Geoffrey Ryan, Salvation Army, Canadian, Rostov-on-Don, Visa denied

February 2001 Fr Stanislaw Opiela, Catholic, Polish, Visa denied

Summer 2001 James Mettenbrink, Church of Christ, US, Komi, Visa denied

July 2001 Craig Rucin, Evangelical, US, Udmurtia, Deported

August 2001 Larry Little, Church of Christ, US, Komi, Visa revoked

October 2001 Albert Giessler, Evangelical, German, Visa annulled

October 2001 Carl-Gustaf Severin, Pentecostal, Swedish, Visa revoked

October 2001 Charles Tharp, Church of Christ, US, Komi, Visa revoked

November 2001 Clayton Whidden, Church of Christ, US, Rostov-on-Don, Visa denied

December 2001 Br Bruno Maziolek, Catholic, French, Yaroslavl, Visa denied

Early 2002 Anonymous, Pentecostal, Krasnodar, Visa revoked

February 2002 Paul Kim, Evangelical, South Korean, Kalmykia, Visa revoked

February 2002 Autumn Newson, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church, commonly known as the Mormons), US, Pskov, Deported

February 2002 Matthew Crain, LDS Church, US, Pskov, Deported

February 2002 Weston Pope, LDS Church, US, Pskov, Deported

March 2002 Bob Weiner, Evangelical, US, Kalmykia, Visa denied

March 2002 Pastor Aleksei Ledyayev, Pentecostal, Permanent resident of Latvia, Deported (Visa subsequently revoked)

Spring 2002 Kim Ge Khen, Presbyterian, South Korean, Khabarovsk, Visa revoked

April 2002 Fr Stefano Caprio, Catholic, Italian, Vladimir, Visa revoked

April 2002 Bishop Jerzy Mazur, Catholic, Polish, Irkutsk, Visa revoked

April 2002 Mun Khi In, Methodist, South Korean, Sakhalin, Visa revoked

June 2002 Ronald Cook, Evangelical, US, Kostroma, Visa denied

June 2002 Virginia Cook, Evangelical, US, Kostroma, Visa denied

Summer 2002 Bill Norton, Pentecostal, US, Kostroma, Visa denied

July 2002 Jeffrey Wollman, Evangelical, US, Kostroma, Visa denied

July 2002 Susan Wollman, Evangelical, US, Kostroma, Visa denied

July 2002 Jordan Wollman, Evangelical, US, Kostroma, Visa denied

August 2002 Fr Stanislav Krajinak, Catholic, Slovak, Yaroslavl, Visa denied

August 2002 Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, Buddhist, Tibetan refugee status, Visa denied

August 2002 Chalyschan Seidi, Muslim, Turkish, Bashkortostan, Deported

August 2002 Victor Barousse, Pentecostal, US, Irkutsk, Visa denied

August 2002 Joseph Yu, Presbyterian, US, Moscow, Deported

September 2002 Fr Jaroslaw Wisniewski, Catholic, Polish, Sakhalin, Visa revoked

September 2002 Fr Edward Mackiewicz, Catholic, Polish, Rostov-on-Don, Visa revoked

September 2002 Leo Martensson, Evangelical, Swedish, Krasnodar, Visa revoked

November 2002 Randolph Marshall, Evangelical, US, Yaroslavl, Visa revoked

November 2002 Shelley Marshall, Evangelical, US, Yaroslavl, Visa revoked

Late 2002 Jim Capaldo, Evangelical, US, Tuva, Visa denied

Spring 2003, Greg Clark, Pentecostal, US, Altai Republic, Deported

c. April 2003, Elsie Dannhauer, Canadian, evangelical, Rostov-on-Don, Visa denied

c. April 2003, Larry Dannhauer, Canadian, evangelical, Rostov-on-Don, Visa denied

July 2003 Dana Carbone, Evangelical, US, Mari-El, Visa denied

Autumn 2003 Anonymous, Evangelical, US, Tatarstan, Deported

October 2003 Takhir Talipov, Evangelical, Permanent resident Latvia, Tatarstan, Residency denied

October 2004 Fr Janusz Blaut, Catholic, Polish, North Ossetia, Visa denied

March 2005 Robert Garrad, Salvation Army, British, Moscow, Visa denied

March 2005 Karl Lydholm, Salvation Army, Danish, Moscow, Visa denied

April 2005 Bishop Siegfried Springer, Lutheran, German, European, Visa revoked

July 2005 Hugo Van Niekerk, Evangelical, South African, Central & Southern, Visa denied

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

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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