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BELARUS: Foreign religious workers out?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

While tight restrictions on the religious freedom of foreigners who live in Belarus were enshrined in the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities are increasingly being barred from the country, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The State Committee for Religious Affairs – which has to approve all such invitations and agree that such visits are "necessary" - denied the charismatic Full Gospel Union permission to invite Nigerian pastor Anselm Madubuko to preach in three of its churches in August. One church had "no basis" for inviting him as it was not registered, while the visit to another was "inexpedient", officials declared. A foreign citizen pastoring a congregation founded a decade ago did not have his annual religious work permit renewed in early 2006, while twelve Polish Catholic priests and nuns have been told their visas will not be renewed at the end of this year. The Hare Krishna community is among those unable to invite foreign citizens as they do not have the required ten registered religious communities.

While a more recent phenomenon than in neighbouring Russia, an increasing number of foreign religious workers are finding themselves barred from Belarus, Forum 18 News Service has found. In addition to tight legal restrictions on what foreign religious workers may do if permitted to enter the country, their activity is reportedly closely monitored by the state authorities. Foreign citizens whose official reason for being in Belarus is other than religious work run the risk of being reprimanded or even expelled if they participate in the organisational life of a religious community.

The 2002 Religion Law contains particular restrictions on the religious freedom of foreign citizens. Only religious associations – made up of at least ten registered religious communities, including at least one active on the territory of Belarus for at least 20 years – have the right to invite them to conduct religious activity. The ineligibility of the five registered Belarusian Krishna communities to do so contributed to their complaint to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (see 4 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=682). In January 2006 the state authorities rejected the UN Committee's conclusion that they had violated the Krishna devotees' religious freedom, however (see 3 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=822).

A 23 February 1999 Council of Ministers decree additionally stipulates that invitations are subject to approval by the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. In requesting permission, a religious association is "to give grounds for the necessity of such an invitation and include a copy of documentation certifying the religious education of the invitee". If successful, the foreign religious worker may conduct religious activity only within places of worship belonging to or premises continuously rented by a particular host religious organisation. The transfer of a foreign religious worker from one religious organisation to another requires permission from a relevant religious affairs official, even for a single event. The absence of such permission recently led the authorities to seek prosecution of a Polish Catholic priest who celebrated Mass while passing through Minsk (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849).

In what to Forum 18's knowledge is the most recent case of a foreign missionary being barred from Belarus, the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs on 25 July 2006 denied the charismatic Full Gospel Union permission to invite Nigerian pastor Anselm Madubuko to preach to three of its member churches from 17 to 20 August. In his written refusal, viewed by Forum 18, Vice-chairman Vladimir Lameko states that the Committee considered the request in conjunction with officials in the three localities where New Generation congregations wished to receive Madubuko. In Postavy (Vitebsk region), he writes, the New Generation congregation does not hold state registration, meaning that there is "no basis" for inviting Madubuko to conduct religious activity there. The church in Svetlogorsk (Gomel region) similarly does not have permission from the local district executive committee to hold "religious rites and ceremonies" at its building, Lameko continues, while religious affairs officials in both Brest and Baranovichi (Brest region) are said to consider Madubuko's visit "inexpedient" due to "the violation of Belarusian law" by the local New Generation leadership.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 27 September, Baranovichi's state official dealing with religious affairs confirmed that there have been "violations" by the town's New Generation church over the course of the previous year. Ruslan Krutko was initially at a loss to say exactly what these were, however. He finally claimed that the church had "founded a religious school without permission - they told us it was a study group, but in that case there should only be people in it from Baranovichi, whereas people from all over Belarus were there." He also maintained that one of the alleged school's participants was a minor who did not have parental consent.

When Forum 18 asked whether there had been a subsequent prosecution in order for Krutko to qualify this activity as a violation, he was again hesitant. He acknowledged that no prosecution had taken place, at first claiming that this was due to a deficiency in the law, then abruptly denied that the law was flawed and finally explaining that "we asked the administrative commission to prosecute but they didn't support our request". Krutko did assure Forum 18 that there were now no complaints about the church's activity, however, "so in future their requests will be granted".

In the wake of a police raid on Baranovichi New Generation Church at the beginning of 2006, officials accused Gennady Akhrimovich, who chairs the church's council, of organising a study group of eleven church members without registering its statutes. Akhrimovich argued that the study group was not a separate organisation but an integral part of the church's work as outlined in its statutes and as a registered religious community under the 2002 Religion Law (see F18News 18 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=762).

Speaking to Forum 18 in Baranovichi shortly before the authorities announced their decision to deny Anselm Madubuko permission to enter Belarus, Pastor Leonid Voronenko said that it was to be the Nigerian pastor's first visit, following three to Russia since the spring of 2005. Were Madubuko's application successful, he continued, all his religious activity would take place within the confines of the three New Generation churches inviting him – as required by the 1999 Decree. Even before the rejection, however, Voronenko had some doubts that the visit would go ahead. He pointed out that, although an invitation to Pastor Aleksei Ledyayev of New Generation's parent church in Latvia was approved by the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in 2003, "he wasn't given a visa". Ledyayev, a permanent resident of Latvia, last visited Belarus in 2002 and has been barred from Russia in the same year.

In Minsk, Pastor Boris Chernoglaz of the city's Church of Jesus Christ - another member of the Full Gospel Union - pointed out to Forum 18 that there are now very few foreign religious workers in Belarusian Protestant churches. In contrast to Russia - and other religious freedom restrictions in Belarus – he also suggested that the practice of refusing them religious work visas was comparatively recent (see F18News 7 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=644).

Chernoglaz believes the case of his church's founder - Ukrainian citizen Veniamin Brukh, denied entry to Belarus in 2000 - to be one of the first. In a 28 March 2000 letter viewed by Forum 18, Vladimir Lameko of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs rejected the Full Gospel Union's request to invite Pastor Brukh to Belarus, explaining that the Church of Jesus Christ "already has highly qualified religious personnel, so there is no need to invite a foreign citizen to engage in religious activity in that community".

In other cases, Belarusian sources have told Forum 18 that a foreign Protestant pastor - who did not wish to be named - did not have his annual religious work permit renewed in early 2006. The congregation was founded a decade ago and has about 300 worshippers. US citizen Mark Rose, who founded an independent Baptist church in the town of Ratomka (Minsk region), was reportedly denied entry to Belarus in 2005.

A spokesperson at the Uppsala-based Pentecostal Word of Life Church told Forum 18 on 17 October that one of its pastors, Carl-Gustaf Severin, was refused a visa to Belarus approximately two years ago, having last visited the country in 1998. Severin had his Russian visa revoked in 2001, but has been able to revisit Russia more recently.

A foreign Protestant wishing to remain anonymous who used to work in the Belarusian humanitarian aid sphere told Forum 18 on 16 October that he does not know the official reason why he was denied a visa. While he believes his religious motivation – and open partnership with Christian churches – to be linked to the state's action, however, he pointed out that "if we had held theology conferences they wouldn't have minded, but we were teaching responsibility, a change of attitude – that it is not Jesus' example to sit down and accept what happens in your community." In this regard, he agreed with Forum 18's suggestion that churches and faith-inspired humanitarian organisations were currently being targeted not primarily for their religiosity, but because – in the wake of the enforced closure of more politicised NGOs - they were now in the frontline. "Humanitarian aid and charitable projects are also teaching how to strategise, to create some kind of network outside the control of the regime," he explained. "Even if they are social or religious, they attract people – so the authorities are playing safe by applying pressure."

While not aware of expulsion cases of religious workers other than those already familiar to Forum 18, this foreign Protestant noted the Belarusian authorities' present tactic to be to allow a person's visa to expire and then not to renew it rather than the more "provocative" action of deportation.

In apparent confirmation of the foreign Protestant's suggestions, the director of a Belarusian youth charity has told Forum 18 of a recent official warning to public organisations not to keep any religious literature or to allow religious activities to take place on their premises. The director was reportedly summoned for an interview with a district official at which a KGB official present referred to support for the 2004 Ukrainian Orange Revolution by Pastor Sunday Adelaja's Kiev-based Embassy of God Church. Alleging that that church was attempting to influence Belarusian churches, he is said to have commented: "We are not going to allow Maidan here [a reference to Kiev's Independence Square, the site of mass protests during the Orange Revolution]."

From Nigeria, Sunday Adelaja was a university student in Minsk during the late 1980s and left Belarus in the mid-1990s after founding a church there. Now in Kiev, his Embassy of God Church is probably the largest Protestant congregation in the Ukrainian capital. A supporter of the church, Leonid Chernovetsky became mayor of Kiev in the wake of the Orange Revolution.

Contacted in Kiev on 17 October, an Embassy of God spokesperson could not recall when Pastor Adelaja had last visited Belarus, but maintained that he was not officially banned from doing so. Pastor Adelaja was barred from Russia this summer (see F18News 7 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=794).

In Baranovichi, Pastor Leonid Voronenko described to Forum 18 how his 150-strong church is closely monitored. Local officials question, for example, if it has foreign teachers, how it is organised, how many members are businessmen or students and how much it receives in donations, he said, "but we refuse to answer." One church member told Forum 18 of her suspicion that there were informers in the congregation, since only this could explain what happened when a youth leader gave an impromptu sermon inspired by the birth of his child in January 2006: "We were warned by the authorities that only the pastor has the right to preach and that anyone else must apply for permission two weeks in advance." Pastor Voronenko wryly pointed out to Forum 18 that the constant check-ups did have a positive side, however: "When visiting police or officials say that they can see we're not a sect, or that society needs more people like us."

Other of Forum 18's interviewees maintained that foreign religious workers are subject to similar scrutiny. According to Sergei Lukanin of the embattled New Life Church (see most recently F18News 6 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=851), a Minsk church affiliated to the main Pentecostal Union was recently warned by officials after it invited a Swedish Christian woman to speak even though she did not have state permission, "but it turned out alright in the end." Gennady Brutsky of the main Baptist Union described how Jeff Laughlin, a US citizen holding a humanitarian work visa, was questioned by police and officials after he addressed a Bible college graduation ceremony in May/June 2006.

Forum 18 has previously been alerted to intrusive monitoring of prominent foreign participation in religious activity (see F18News 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560). The recent action against Catholic priest Fr Antoni Koczko after he celebrated Mass in Minsk without state permission indicates that this is not confined to Protestant churches (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849).

Ruslan Krutko, Baranovichi's religious affairs official, insisted to Forum 18 that the authorities "don't have any particular policy not to allow foreigners" and cited a recent visit by German citizens to a local New Apostolic church. Some invitations are indeed successful - in January 2006, for example, the Full Gospel Union received permission from the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs for Danish citizens Erling Laursen and Andreas Jorgensen to visit Living Faith Church in Gomel. Mufti Abu-Bekir Shabanovich told Forum 18 on 21 July that his Minsk community has had no difficulty inviting imams from Turkey: "If a person proves to be OK, then their visa is extended, but if they haven't understood something, or don't fit in with the laws of this country, then they go."

Also speaking to Forum 18 in Minsk this summer, Greek Catholics Larysa Androsik and Anatoli Syomukha said that Apostolic Visitor Sergei Gajek, who holds dual Polish and Vatican citizenship, has had not difficulty travelling to Belarus to visit their community.

Foreign Catholic priests and nuns may have requests to extend their religious work visas refused, however, as happened recently to 12 Polish priests and nuns in Grodno diocese (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=850) and two Polish priests at the end of 2005 (see F18News 13 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=715).

While such cases still appear rare, the Catholic Church is particularly vulnerable in this regard as more than half of its approximately 350 clergy in Belarus are foreign citizens. A Polish Catholic priest working in Belarus who requested anonymity recently suggested to Forum 18 that legal restrictions on foreign religious workers could to some extent be seen as beneficial. Since the head of the parish council is legally also the head of the parish, he explained, "I'm not responsible if something happens - if the fire service conduct a check-up, for example." In general, however, the priest acknowledged that there were significant drawbacks for foreign citizens under the 2002 Religion Law, such as the impossibility of founding a monastery or convent (see F18News 30 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=67). "As a foreigner you only have two rights," he remarked, "to shut up and sit still." (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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

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