

13 January 2014

BELARUS: Baptist worship raided, Catholic priest "will be tried"

By Olga Glace, Forum 18

Three Baptist leaders are likely to face administrative punishments after a police raid on a Council of Churches meeting for worship in Gomel in south-eastern Belarus, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Police interrupted the pre-Christmas service, took names of all those present, interrogated some and seized a Bible, Baptists complained. Reached by Forum 18, police officer Mikhail Yezepenko, who led the raid, declined absolutely to explain why he and other police officers raided the service. Meanwhile, KGB secret police spokesperson Artur Strehk has insisted to Forum 18 that the KGB's treason investigation into Catholic priest Fr Vladislav Lazar is continuing and he "will be brought to trial". And at least four employees of a state-run building company objected to being forced to work on the day they celebrated Christmas, 25 December 2013.

Police have resumed raids on meetings for worship by unregistered Baptist communities in Belarus, Forum 18 News Service has learned. On 22 December 2013, just days before it marked Christmas, police raided Sunday worship of one of their congregations in the south-eastern town of Gomel [Homyel]. Three church leaders are likely to face administrative punishment.

Mikhail Yezepenko, Deputy Head of Gomel's Soviet District Police's Preservation of Order and Crime Prevention Department who led the raid, declined absolutely to explain why he and other police officers raided the Baptist service. Reached on 10 January 2014, he put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked.

Meanwhile, KGB secret police spokesperson Artur Strehk has insisted to Forum 18 that the treason investigation by the KGB against Catholic priest Fr Vladislav Lazar is continuing and he "will be brought to trial". The priest has told local journalists he cannot discuss the investigation, but has again asserted his innocence. He remains under travel restrictions (see below).

And at least four employees of a state-run building company objected to being forced to work on the day they celebrated Christmas, 25 December 2013 (see below).

Raid

On 22 December 2013, ten police officers and two attesting witnesses broke into the private home in Gomel's Soviet District where local Baptists regularly meet for worship, church members complained on 25 December 2013. The house belongs to Andrei Tupalsky.

The police took pictures and filmed the meeting for worship. After the second sermon preached by Oleg Danilevsky, the police officers demanded the religious meeting be stopped and interrupted the communal prayer.

As soon as the worship service finished, police began recording the internal passport details and home addresses of those present and interrogating some of them. The police drew up protocols of an offence on the Church leaders - Pastor Aleksandr Zolotaryev, second preacher Danilevsky and deacon Tupalsky, charging them with holding an "unauthorised mass public event".

Danilevsky's personal Bible was confiscated, though officers failed to give him a record of the confiscation, church members complained.

Zolotaryev and another pastor Pyotr Yashchenko separately declined to discuss details of the raid with Forum 18, explaining that they "don't want to get involved in politics". Yashchenko told Forum 18 on 8 January: "With God's help we'll survive the difficult times, but the detailed information is available only for Council of Churches Baptists for them to pray."

The head of the Ideology Department of Soviet Region administration, Yulia Sobol, insisted that the Baptist community faces no problems. "Nobody sent us any complaints," she told Forum 18 on 3 January. "If there is information on police raids please ask the police."

Third 2013 police raid

The December 2013 raid was the third on Council of Churches Baptists in Gomel in 2013. Following separate raids on worship services at both of their congregations in the city in February and April 2013, three local leaders were fined. Pastor Nikolai Varushin was fined about one month's average local wages, and Yashchenko and Valentin Shchedrenok were fined much smaller amounts (see F18News 14 June 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1847).

Yashchenko declined to tell Forum 18 in January 2014 whether religious literature confiscated during the April 2013 police raid had been returned to the community. Another local Baptist told Forum 18 the confiscated literature has not been returned.

In Belarus state registration of religious organisations is compulsory and the Religion Law makes no provision for those who do not wish to register. This primarily concerns Council of Churches Baptists, who believe registration leads to state interference (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1796).

Three to be fined?

Forum 18 has been unable to find out which Article of the Code of Administrative Offences is being used to punish Zolotaryev, Danilevsky and Tupalsky. A secretary at Soviet District Court, who did not give her name, told Forum 18 on 13 January that she had no information. One Gomel-based Baptist told Forum 18 the administrative cases against the three church members have not yet reached court.

Generally unregistered religious activity is punished under Article 23.24, Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes organisers who violate regulations for holding demonstrations or other mass public events. It carries a penalty of fines of between 20 and 40 base units or a short jail term. From 1 October 2013 each base unit is 130,000 Roubles, making the minimum fine 2,600,000 Roubles (1,700 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros or 275 US Dollars).

In the case of the December 2013 raid, Part 3 of the same article could be applied, although none of the three individuals was fined following the earlier 2013 raids. Part 3 states that "violations provided by Parts 1 and 2 committed within a year after the punishment for similar deeds attract fines of 20 to 50 base units or a short jail term".

KGB continues investigation of Fr Lazar

KGB spokesperson Strehk insisted to Forum 18 on 13 January from Minsk that the criminal investigation of Catholic priest Fr Lazar on treason charges continues and he will be brought to trial. But he was unable to say when any trial will be.

Asked by Forum 18 how the prosecution investigation is proceeding, Strehk said he could not discuss it. "If there are any significant procedural moves, the public will be informed in accordance with established procedures," he told Forum 18. "Please be reminded that the pre-trial restrictions were changed," he added, a reference to Fr Lazar's release from prison in December 2013 and transfer to living at home under restrictions.

Fr Lazar's 3 December 2013 release from the KGB secret police detention centre in Minsk came six months after his unannounced arrest and six days after his 46th birthday. Among those interrogated in the case was Fr Lazar's diocesan bishop, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of the Minsk-Mogilev diocese (see F18News 9 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1905).

"The only thing I'll say is that I am innocent"

Fr Lazar himself confirmed he remains under investigation to a journalist of "Nasha Niva" newspaper who visited him in the town of Vileika in the north-west of Minsk Region on 11 December 2013. "The investigation is going on. I can't say anything concerning the case otherwise I'll be taken back to prison. The only thing I'll say is that I am innocent." The journalist said he made no complaints about the way he had been treated.

Fr Aleksandr Barilo, parish priest of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross parish in Vileika, confirmed to "Nasha Niva" that the Church had assigned Fr Lazar to the parish.

Lyubov Lunyova, a journalist of "Narodnaya Volya" (People's Will) newspaper and the Lazars' family friend confirmed that Fr Lazar is serving in Vileika and remains under restrictions on his movement. "It's good that his family lives in Molodechno, an easy distance from the priest's current location, so they can visit him," she told Forum 18 on 8 January.

Fr Lazar is cheerful and energetic, though looking a bit thinner, Lunyova added. "The detention has not at all changed him, he is not hardened and has preserved his sense of humour."

Enforced Christmas working

In the south-western city of Brest, Catholic and Protestant workers of state-owned company Construction Trust No. 8 were forced to

work on their Christmas Day, 25 December, Forum 18 has learned. Unidentified senior managers announced that 25 December was to be a working day instead of 8 January (not itself a public holiday but the day after the Orthodox Christmas public holiday). In some company divisions it was apparently done on the basis of a written directive, in others just by word of mouth.

In Belarus both western Christmas (25 December) and Orthodox Christmas (7 January) are official public holidays.

Roman Kisliak, a Brest-based human rights defender of the For Freedom Movement, told Forum 18 on 3 January that when checking on Construction Trust No. 8 on 25 December in response to complaints he found people at work. "It seems that their working day [25 December] was not even shortened," Kisliak told the praca-by.info on 30 December. He said he had been unable to obtain any written instructions for employees to work on this day.

National legislation allows an employer to shift working days, but in this case no need existed, Kisliak insisted. "This is the tyranny of the bosses," he complained to Forum 18. "It appears that at Catholic and Protestant Christmas people were working, while at Orthodox Christmas they will be off for several days."

On 24 December 2013, Kisliak wrote to the government's Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako, the Prosecutor General and the Architecture and Construction Ministry demanding to countermand the "illegal" instructions. He insisted that the demand to work on a religious holiday (also a public holiday) was a violation of individuals' rights under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This guarantees the right to freedom of "thought, conscience and religion", including the right to manifest any religion or belief "in worship, observance, practice and teaching".

"I consider forcing people to work on this day outrageous and infringing basic human rights and religious feelings," Kisliak complained in the letters seen by Forum 18. "Such actions of Construction Trust No. 8's management can lead to religious enmity, as Orthodox Christians will have more days off at Christmas while Catholic and Protestant employees will have to work."

The Prosecutor General replied to Kisliak that the complaint had been forwarded to the Regional Prosecutor's office.

A 10 January 2014 reply from First Deputy Architecture and Construction Minister Irina Arkhipova - seen by Forum 18 - insists that operational reasons required work on 25 December 2013. It claimed that it was in response to workers' requests as the Trust was committed to finish a construction project by the end of 2013. Arkhipova insists that recommendations were issued "not to ask Catholic and Protestant employees to work on their holiday, which was done".

Kisliak also wrote to the Director General of Construction Trust No. 8, Mikhail Vodchits, asking him to clarify who and why issued such an order. A 30 December 2013 reply from his deputy Igor Silchenko, seen by Forum 18, similarly claimed that the leadership had issued an instruction "to exempt from work persons of Catholic and Protestant confession on the day of their festival".

Forum 18 called Vodchits at the Trust on 10 January, but officials said he was not available on the phone. No other Trust official would comment.

Kisliak noted that Construction Trust No. 8 has about 4,000 employees and many are of Catholic or Protestant background who wished not to work on this day. "People are very upset and nervous. Their families are waiting for them at home. They have been preparing for this major religious holiday in advance", he told the Belarus news service pyx.by on 24 December.

Only four workers complained to human right activists about the required working, but asked not to be identified. "People are afraid of being sacked, but two of those who complained didn't show up [on 25 December]," Kisliak told Forum 18. "I don't know the consequences." (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1796.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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