

19 February 2021

BELARUS: Bailiffs, police evict Church

By Olga Glace, Forum 18

Bailiffs accompanied by police used an angle grinder and a crowbar on 17 February to gain access to Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church to evict it. Officials told the Church they were enforcing a 2009 court order. Aleksey Petrukovich, who signed the enforcement order, refused to explain why the eviction happened, and why force was used. "I am indignant. This is a hostile takeover of church property with the excuse of official papers," Sergiy Melyanets, a member of a different Church who witnessed the eviction, told Forum 18.

On 17 February, police and court bailiffs forcibly evicted New Life Full Gospel Church from the building it has used in the capital Minsk since 2002. Some 30 bailiffs, police, and Housing Repairs and Utilities Association officials took part in the eviction. Bailiffs used an angle grinder to cut the door lock to gain entry.

The bailiff's enforcement order was signed by Aleksey Petrukovich. He refused to explain to Forum 18 why the eviction happened, and why force was used. "All the best, goodbye" he replied to questions before putting the phone down (see below).

Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko refused to let the 30 bailiffs and other officials enter the building, so bailiffs ordered an official to cut through the lock on the Church's door. "After the locks were broken, this crowd [the about 30 officials] flooded inside the church, interrupting 60 or 70 people who were praying," New Life Church Administrator Vitaly Antonchikov told Forum 18. "The officials ordered everyone out of the Church, threatening to detain them for 24 hours if they did not leave" (see below).

"I am indignant. This is a hostile takeover of church property with the excuse of official papers," Sergiy Melyanets, who witnessed the eviction and is a member of a different Church, told Forum 18 on 18 February (see below).

The head of the country's Full Gospel Union, Bishop Leonid Voronenko, condemned the authorities' seizure of New Life Church. "It cannot leave me, any believer or any sensible person indifferent," he declared on his Facebook page on 17 February. "The Church was created by the Lord God, and it is great insolence to lay your hands on what is of God!"

Bishop Voronenko was joined by two other Protestant leaders - the head of the Pentecostal Union Sergey Tsvor and the head of the Baptist Union Leonid Mikhovich - in a statement of concern about the eviction. "Expressing a unified position," they wrote on 19 February, "we believe that such actions are unacceptable in relation to any church community, regardless of denominational affiliation. The officials who allowed such a course of events should, together with representatives of the community and the bishop of the Full Gospel Union, begin to search for a solution to this issue with the aim of resolving it in a way acceptable for all parties."

No alternative building has been offered to New Life Church, and meetings for worship will now be held online, Antonchikov of New Life told Forum 18. "We have a lot of people who come to church, and it is difficult to find a building large enough for our meetings" (see below).

No official is prepared to explain why the sudden eviction happened. Antonchikov of New Life suspects that the reason is a video by church members protesting against violence by the regime against protestors (see below).

Latest eviction order

On 7 December 2020 the Enforcement Department of Minsk Executive Committee [the city administration] issued an eviction order requiring New Life Church to vacate its building by 31 December. The Enforcement Department threatened to use force if New Life did not obey.

New Life Church bought its building - a former cowshed on the western edge of Minsk - in 2002. The Church converted the building into its place of worship, turning it into a spacious, modern structure, but the authorities have refused to change its legal designation as a cowshed.

The regime has repeatedly tried to evict the Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1339) and has refused to

allow the church to legalise its position by changing the building's designation to a place of worship, or to use it for meetings for worship.

The Enforcement Department claimed it was executing an order of the Higher Economic Court in January 2009 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1244). An unsuccessful attempt to enforce this order took place in August 2009 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1339).

The last two serious attempts to evict the Church before December 2020 were in April 2017 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2284), and in June 2013 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1847).

The Secretary of the Head of the Enforcement Department refused to explain on 18 February 2021 why the city authorities decided to evict the Church now. She told Forum 18 that they can only explain this after a written application for comments is approved by the Head of the Enforcement Department.

Bailiffs arrive on 5 January

On 5 January 2021, during a meeting for prayer, court bailiffs arrived to execute the court order. "About 200 people were praying in the building," New Life Church Administrator Vitaly Antonchikov told Forum 18 on 18 February.

The Church did not allow the bailiffs to enter the building, and Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko was fined for refusing to obey the court order. "At least it was a minimum fine, and that's not the biggest problem," Antonchikov commented.

30 bailiffs, police, other officials arrive on 17 February

On 17 February the regime then sent about of 30 officials to New Life to enforce the eviction order: 10 bailiffs, police officers, and officials of Minsk's Moscow District Housing Repairs and Utilities Association.

The bailiff's enforcement order, signed by Aleksey Petrukovich on 13 February (seen by Forum 18), orders New Life to leave its premises by 16 February. It warned that if it failed to do so it would be forcibly evicted from its building at 11.00 am on 17 February. The Housing Repairs and Utilities Association claims it owns the Church building, and that the Church owes large amounts of unpaid tax (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2284).

Court bailiff Petrukovich refused to explain to Forum 18 on 19 February why the eviction happened, and why force was used. "All the best, goodbye" he replied to questions before putting the phone down.

The 17 February eviction

A video published on New Life's YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvRV-0j5jjY>) shows the raid from the beginning, with people in New Life discussing whether a riot squad and violence would be used.

Pastor Goncharenko refused to let the bailiffs and other officials enter the building. A bailiff then accused him of violating Administrative Code Article 23.4 ("Failure to submit to the legal instruction or demand of an official in carrying out official duties").

Bailiffs then ordered an official to cut through the lock on the Church's door, which he did with an angle grinder. Another official used a crowbar to force open an internal door.

"After the locks were broken, this crowd [the about 30 officials] flooded inside the church, interrupting 60 or 70 people who were praying," Antonchikov of New Life told Forum 18. "The officials ordered everyone out of the Church, threatening to detain them for 24 hours if they did not leave." The video shows Church members' distress at the eviction, and their support of each other as they left.

"I am indignant. This is a hostile takeover of church property with the excuse of official papers," Sergiy Melyanets, who witnessed the eviction and is a member of a different Church, told Forum 18 on 18 February. "I was told by police officers that they were legally present."

The regime allowed New Life to remove some furniture and valuable goods, which church members piled up outside in the snow, but most of the Church's movable property remained in the building until handed over today [19 February]. Antonchikov of New Life told Forum 18 that the building is occupied by the authorities, and is guarded day and night to prevent church members entering.

Why?

Alla Martynova, Deputy Head of the Executive Committee's Ideology Department

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612), refused to explain the regime's actions to Forum 18. "When I am told to comment I'll do it," she answered on 19 February, before putting the phone down.

Neither the Head of the Executive Committee's Ideology and Youth Unit Sergey Shendik, nor the Head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department Anna Koronevskaya answered their phones on 19 February.

Antonchikov of New Life suspects that the reason for the sudden eviction is that New Life recorded and on 21 November 2020 posted on its YouTube channel a video by church members protesting against the regime's violence against protestors.

No alternative building offered to New Life

Antonchikov told Forum 18 that the regime has not offered the Church an alternative building, and officials have only discussed the possibility of this with the Church.

The Deputy Head of Moscow District's Housing Repairs and Utilities Association, Maksim Tishuk, refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 18 February. He told Forum 18 to "monitor the news to see what alternatives would be offered to New Life".

Services will now be held online, Antonchikov of New Life told Forum 18. "We have a lot of people who come to church, and it is difficult to find a building large enough for our meetings."

Pastor Goncharenko will discuss the problem of a new building with Minsk Executive Committee.

New Life eviction, Orthodox parish builds two churches

A disused railway carriage was located 500 metres (yards) from New Life's building and this was used from January 2001 by a Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) community (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=516), without the regime raising any questions about the railway carriage's legal status or use as a place of worship. In November 2004 police visited the Orthodox Church thinking it was New Life Church.

In 2008 the parish with city permission started building the Blessed Kseniya of St Petersburg Chapel on the site. This was completed and consecrated in 2009, and soon after building work for the main St Michael the Archangel Church began. Its foundations were blessed in February 2012, and the completed Church was consecrated in July 2013 according to the parish website.

Regime's violations and threats increase since fraudulent August 2020 election

Violations of freedom of religion and interlinked freedoms have worsened amid widespread continuing protests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) against the regime's falsification of August 2020 presidential election results, as well as the regime's continuing targeting in 2021 of human rights defenders (<https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/belarus>).

Freedom of religion and belief violations have included refusal to let the then-head of the Catholic Church in Belarus, Belarusian citizen Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, return to Belarus (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2597) on 31 August 2020. (The authorities allowed the Archbishop to return only on 24 December 2020 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2627).

On 2 September 2020, the then-Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, summarily halted the right of Catholic priest, Polish citizen Fr Jerzy Wilk, to work as a priest at one day's notice (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2602). About 500 parishioners wrote to the Plenipotentiary asking him to withdraw his decision, but he did not do so. Fr Wilk left Belarus in October 2020.

Forum 18 is not aware that Gulyako's successor as Plenipotentiary Aleksandr Rumak, who took office in December 2020 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2627), has refused permission for foreign citizens to hold religious jobs in Belarus at the invitation of local religious organisations.

On 18 November 2020, the General Prosecutor's Office announced that it had issued official warnings to Fr Sergei Lepin, then the head of the Synodal Information Department of the Orthodox Church, and to the Vicar-General of the Catholic Minsk-Mogilev Diocese Bishop Yuri Kasabutsky (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2627) about alleged violations of the law.

On 27 November 2020, the then-Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Gulyako, issued a written warning to the Orthodox Church. It pointed to the "strict obligation" on all religious communities to abide by Article 16 of the Constitution (which among other things bans religious organisations which "are directed against the sovereignty of Belarus, its constitutional system and social accord"), and Article 8 of the Religion Law (which among other things bans the use of places of worship for "events of a political nature, as well as speeches and calls insulting representatives of the organs of state power, officials and individuals").

The warning also pointed out that if a religious community repeats the "violation" within a year (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612), the Plenipotentiary can apply to the court for the religious community to be stripped of its legal status (and thus its right to exist).

On 17 December 2020, the head of the Orthodox Church in Belarus, Metropolitan Veniamin (Tupeko), wrote to Archbishop Artemy (Kishchenko) of Grodno, informing him of the warning and instructing him to ensure the observance in his diocese of these demands. The warning was made public on 6 January 2021, when Russian Orthodox blogger Andrei Kurayev published the letter on his blog.

Presidential Administration blocks charitable donation

The Presidential Administration's Humanitarian Activity Department refused to allow the Minsk Catholic Archdiocese's charity Caritas to accept foreign money to support a project to help poor and homeless people. Caritas Minsk described the decision on its Facebook page on 9 February as "sad news". The project aimed to support about 700 people in need with food, as well as plants and animals to grow for food.

The Humanitarian Activity Department - which registers all such foreign charitable grants before local charities can receive them - does not give reasons for any refusals.

Forum 18 tried to find out if the Humanitarian Activity Department refused to allow Caritas Minsk to receive the foreign funds because of the religious affiliation of the charity. It tried repeatedly to reach the Department's director Igor Kudrevich on 19 February, but was unable to speak to him. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus
(<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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