

16 April 2004

RUSSIA: Was terrorist threat to Protestant Easter celebration genuine?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Although Russian Orthodox and Catholics celebrated Easter without problem in the Siberian city of Tyumen on 11 April, a large-scale Protestant Easter evangelistic service due to have been held in a city-owned stadium on 14 April was cancelled by the authorities, citing what they said was a "terrorist threat". Andrei Knyazhev, co-ordinator of the Protestant service, told Forum 18 News Service he is "almost 99 per cent certain" that the threat was spurious. Forum 18 has been unable to establish the authenticity or otherwise of the threat independently, though the service faced opposition from local Orthodox believers. After an explicit Chechen terrorist threat against Orthodox churches in Russia, the security agencies have stepped up their protection of Orthodox Christmas and Easter services.

It remains unclear whether a reported terrorist threat that led the authorities to cancel a large-scale Protestant Easter evangelistic service due to have been held on 14 April in a rented municipal sports stadium in the western Siberian city of Tyumen was genuine or not. While the regional authorities cited a terrorist threat as grounds for cancelling the Tyumen Council of Christian Churches' contract with the Palace of Sport, the event's co-ordinator Andrei Knyazhev told Forum 18 News Service, it is "almost 99 per cent certain" that the threat was spurious. Knyazhev cited strong opposition to the event from the Orthodox Church, whose local members staged a small demonstration as the Protestants' guests were being transported from the stadium to the substitute venue. In the wake of the cancellation, the local Protestant Churches were forced to move the event to a Pentecostal church in the city.

A leaflet circulated at the Orthodox demonstration by Tyumen Orthodox deanery, of which Forum 18 has received a copy, warned that any Orthodox who pray with non-Orthodox or seek "God's healing" from the event's English guest missionary, David Hathaway, run the risk of excommunication.

Speaking from Tyumen city on 15 April, Knyazhev said that Light to the World Church managed to accommodate the approximately 1,500 non-believers invited to the 14 April service, "but all the church members had to watch via a relay screen on the street outside." He told Forum 18 that the Tyumen authorities "didn't manage to create any more obstacles for us" only because the service's new location was kept secret until the last moment.

On 16 April the press secretary to Tyumen regional vice-governor told Forum 18 that he was unaware of any terrorist threat to the Protestant Easter service, or of a letter being issued by his office warning of such a possibility. On the same day, the Tyumen regional authorities' specialist in religious affairs, Aleksandr Gradusov, confirmed to Forum 18 that the security agencies had warned of a terrorist threat to the service but said that he did not have further details since the matter was not within his area of expertise. Gradusov also confirmed that local Orthodox had staged a small demonstration on 14 April, but pointed out that the Protestants were able to hold their service elsewhere in the city.

Also speaking to Forum 18 on 16 April, the press secretary of Tyumen regional department of the FSB (the main successor to the KGB) said that he, at least, had no information about a possible terrorist threat to the Protestants' Easter service.

Pastor Sergei Lavrenov of Light to the World Pentecostal Church told Forum 18 on 13 April that the Tyumen Council of Christian Churches – which includes Pentecostals, Baptists and Methodists – originally concluded a rental contract with the Palace of Sport on 16 March. Problems arose only on 9 April, he said, when the Russian Interior Ministry's Tyumen regional department sent a letter warning of a possible terrorist threat to the stadium's director, who subsequently annulled the contract. Lavrenov said that the Council of Christian Churches received a similar communication from the local FSB (former KGB) on 12 April, which mentioned the impossibility of providing adequate security for the event. A 12 April letter to Lavrenov from Tyumen's vice-governor, Vladimir Yakushev, of which Forum 18 has also received a copy, states that "in view of information concerning the threat of terrorist acts during the Easter celebrations at the Palace of Sport... the regional administration proposes that you postpone the aforementioned event."

While acknowledging to Forum 18 that the stadium director had promised full reimbursement if the event did not go ahead as agreed, Pastor Lavrenov questioned why, when Orthodox and Catholics in Tyumen celebrated Easter without incident on 11 April,

there was deemed to be a threat aimed at the Protestants' event in particular.

Other sources also point to strong opposition within the local establishment to the Protestants' high-profile evangelisation meeting. On 13 April, the St Petersburg-based Association of Christian Churches of Russia (ACCR) reported that the Tyumen Protestants had chosen to hold their event from 14-15 April rather than on Easter Day itself, "precisely in order to avoid a clash with the Easter celebrations of other Christian churches." Several days before it took place, however, "rumours went around the city that someone high up, who doesn't like that sort of faith, will stop the celebrations," according to ACCR.

A 13 April report by Tyumen regional news website Newsrom, states that Tyumen Orthodox deanery made an official request to the region's justice department in the run-up to the Protestants' event to check the legality of both the activity of the Council of Christian Churches and the presence in Tyumen of David Hathaway.

Forum 18 notes that in the face of an explicit terrorist threat against Orthodox churches, the Russian security agencies have responded by stepping up their protection of Orthodox Christmas and Easter services. According to Interior Ministry figures released on 12 April, 230,000 police officers and soldiers guarded some 6,500 Orthodox churches in Russia's cities on Easter night this year after having searched their premises with specially trained dogs. With the exception of monasteries, Chechen rebel commander Shamil Basayev claimed the right to attack Russian Orthodox churches (among other targets) in a 29 March statement.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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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