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BELARUS: Police deny beating Baptist and religious minorities fear fresh repression

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Police in the town of Lepel [Lyepyel'] have angrily denied beating up a Baptist street evangelist, however the police have admittedly repeatedly detaining Baptists who were running a street library. The detentions allegedly took place at the instigation of the local Orthodox priest wife. Religious minorities fear that, after the strongly disputed referendum and parliamentary elections this week, the government's attention will turn to implementing Belarus' repressive religion law, under which all religious activity by unregistered religious communities is illegal. Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek of Minsk-Mohilev, the latest religious leader to criticise the law, has described some of the law's restrictions and said that "This law appears to normalise relations between the State and the Church, but does it in a way that suits the State, not the Church."

The police chief in the town of Lepel [Lyepyel'] in Vitebsk [Vitsyebks] region north east of the capital Minsk has angrily denied Baptist accusations that one of his officers beat local Baptist Andrei Fokin at the police station on 2 October. "That did not happen," Anatoli Shivlo claimed to Forum 18 News Service from his office in Lepel on 20 October. "I conducted a verification of the claims and nothing confirms that he was beaten." Baptists have told Forum 18 that after his detention for running a street library in the town with fellow Baptist Yuri Fedoruk, Fokin was taken to the police station where he was beaten by Captain Igor Karaga. Forum 18 has been unable to reach Captain Karaga on 20 October.

Equally adamant that no-one had been beaten was Lepel administration head Pyotr Shikshnyan. "They've been feeding you disinformation," he claimed to Forum 18 from his office in Lepel on 20 October. "If Fokin says he's been beaten he should get a doctor's expert opinion and complain formally. It's just a fairy-tale." Yet he seemed remarkably well informed about the beating, which he claimed had not taken place. He also complained that the two men had sung hymns in the police station after their detention on 2 October.

However, he did not deny that the police had repeatedly detained Fokin and Fedoruk, telling Forum 18 that police had explained to them each time why they had been detained.

The two Baptists have long been conducting a street library ministry in Lepel, setting up a small table on the street, singing hymns and offering passers-by Christian literature. Baptist sources told Forum 18 on 10 October that five times in the past three months they have been taken to the police station. "Not once was a record of their detention drawn up," the Baptists complained. "Most of the time the police officers didn't give their names and behaved rudely, accompanying their actions with bad language."

The Baptists reported that on 2 October Fokin and Fedoruk were manning their street library as usual when the wife of the local Orthodox priest – who they say had long tried to obstruct their work - and her son phoned the police, who arrived and took the two men to the police station. After Fokin and Fedoruk began singing hymns as they were waiting, they claim that Captain Karaga grabbed Fokin "in anger", took him upstairs and started to beat him.

Fedoruk tried to get close to the door leading up the stairs to hear what was happening to his friend but another officer moved him away. Fedoruk then contacted their pastors and other fellow Baptists, who started to telephone the police station to demand that the two men be freed. However, the duty officer N. Fedosenok denied that the two men were being held. They were later released.

The following day, a Sunday, the two men again took their library to the streets and again the priest's wife called the police. The Baptists say that the Orthodox priest himself was also there. The police arrived and confiscated the books, but allowed the two Baptists to continue talking to the people who had gathered. Fokin and Fedoruk are members of a congregation that is part of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in CIS countries.

Police chief Shivlo – who admitted that he knew Fokin personally - insisted to Forum 18 that the Baptists can only conduct such street library work in accordance with the religion law and other regulations. "They must get permission for any such activity," he declared. He refused to discuss with Forum 18 why literature had been confiscated from them and why they had been taken to the police station five times in the past three months.

Lepel administrative head Shikshnyan likewise complained that the Baptists were violating regulations, by standing on the street to conduct their library ministry. "They were obstructing the cars and pedestrians trying to go past," he told Forum 18. "Let them come here to the town administration and apply and we will assign them a specific location." At the same time he claimed that there are "no restrictions" on religious life in Belarus.

Many members of Belarus' religious minorities fear that, now the government of President Aleksandr Lukashenko has achieved what it regards as a successful result to both the referendum and parliamentary elections on 17 October, government attention might turn to implementing Belarus' repressive religion law. Under Belarus' repressive 2002 religion law, all religious activity by unregistered religious communities is illegal (see F18News 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=154) and official restrictions on public religious events also exist (see F18News 1 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=131). The influence of militant atheism on officials is strong (see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186), and close supervision by officials of religious communities is an integral part of central state policy (see F18News 9 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=248).

The government claims that 77.3 per cent of voters backed a constitutional amendment allowing President Lukashenko to seek a third term in office, and no opposition candidates were elected to parliament. The result of both votes are very strongly disputed inside and outside Belarus. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which refused to monitor the referendum, has criticised the election for "unrestrained bias and unregulated intrusion into polling stations." Endorsing this view, the European Union has described the process as having fallen "short from being free and fair," and is said to be considering imposing sanctions on Belarus.

Under the religion law, a two year deadline for re-registering religious communities expires on 16 November 2004, and those who fail to gain re-registration by then risk losing any property they own. The most recent religious leader to criticise the religion law is Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek of Minsk-Mohilev. "Unfortunately this law brings with it, in some respects, restrictions on religious activities," he told the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, just ahead of his 90th birthday on 21 October. "Thus the registration of parish communities is prescribed, as is a visa requirement for priests from abroad. They have to renew their residence permits every year and recently the arrival from abroad of priests has almost come to a standstill. This law appears to normalise relations between the State and the Church, but does it in a way that suits the State, not the Church."

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

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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