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BELARUS: "Colossal" "unjust" fine for "illegal" worship

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Vasily Yurevich, of the charismatic New Life Church, was on 28 December fined 150 times the minimum monthly wage for organising an "illegal" service, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko – who faces punishment on the same charges – told Forum 18 that this "is a colossal amount of money." Two weeks earlier the church's re-registration application was rejected, rendering – against international law - all its public activity illegal and subject to punishment. Some religious leaders have been fined in Belarus this year, but the fines have generally been much smaller. Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18 that "we're ready for everything. We will stand up for our rights to worship God. This is all we want to do, and God will defend us." Nina Gordeyuk, deputy head of the local district administration, vehemently denied to Forum 18 that the authorities are waging a campaign against the church.

Members of the 600-strong charismatic New Life Church in the capital Minsk have rejected as "unjust" the massive fine handed down to church administrator Vasily Yurevich on 28 December on charges of organising an "illegal" service on property the church owns. Yurevich was fined over 150 times the minimum monthly wage under Article 167.1, paragraph 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes the repeated violation of regulations governing religious services and other large meetings. "I was a believer during the Communist period and, sad to say, even then the fines for worshipping God were much less than now," Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko – who also faces imminent punishment on the same charges – told Forum 18 News Service from Minsk on 29 December. "Just see how harsh the judges are today."

Three police officers from the city's Moscow district where the New Life church is located testified against Yurevich in hearings which began on 13 December, as did a culture official from the district administration and Alla Martynova of the city branch of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (see F18News 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477). Moscow district court fined Yurevich 3,600,000 Belarusian roubles (10,059 Norwegian kroner, 1,215 Euros or 1,654 US dollars). Pastor Goncharenko estimated that the average wage in Belarus is between 100 and 150 US dollars per month. "Vasily has a wife and three children to support. This is a colossal amount of money."

Pastor Goncharenko said that as soon as the court's written judgment is issued – which is expected on 30 December – Yurevich will lodge an appeal against the fine. "He didn't organise the service, so the court was wrong to fine him for this," Goncharenko declared. "Plus he has been fined as though he has already been punished under this article, which is not true. This is another violation."

The fine came exactly two weeks after the church received written confirmation that its re-registration application had been rejected, rendering all its public activity illegal and subject to punishment. "These lawsuits and the refusal to register the New Life church is the idea of the government's religion committee to deprive the church of its land using all possible means, liquidate the church and artificially make believers look like criminals," Yurevich told Forum 18. He believes the campaign was initiated by Alla Ryabitseva, head of the religion committee for Minsk city. Her telephone at the city administration went unanswered on 29 December.

Although a number of religious leaders have been fined in Belarus this year, such fines were generally much smaller, being around 20 US dollars each. However, in October, Pastor Andrei Sidor of the registered Light to the World charismatic Full Gospel congregation in Minsk was fined about five weeks' average wages (1,110 Norwegian kroner, 136 Euros or 174 US dollars) for holding an unapproved religious meeting at his home (see F18News 5 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=445). Three members of a Council of Churches Baptist church, whose congregations refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in CIS countries, were each fined 380,000 Belarusian roubles (1,200 Norwegian kroner, 153 Euros or 175 US dollars), about 20 times the minimum wage, for singing hymns at a hospital in Gomel [Homyel'] region without first obtaining state permission (see F18News 2 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=404).

Nina Gordeyuk, deputy head of the Minsk Moscow district administration, said she was not aware of the fine on Yurevich, but vehemently denied suggestions that the authorities are waging a campaign against the church. "We're defending the law, which specifies who has the right to meet for worship and where," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 29 December. "Our law doesn't allow believers to meet for worship if the building is not registered as a place of worship. Their building is registered as a cowshed."

Gordeyuk – who told Forum 18 she is a Catholic - insisted that the authorities would take the same action regardless of the religious affiliation of the community. "Even if they were Orthodox they would face the same action."

Despite this, church members have told Forum 18 they intend to continue meeting for worship. They report that some 400 children attended a Christmas service on 25 December, when western-confession Christians (but not Orthodox Christians) in Belarus celebrate Christmas Day.

Pastor Goncharenko maintains that since September – when the church was effectively denied the right to meet legally for worship – services have not been organised. "We no longer have organised services as we have no opportunity to hold them legally," he told Forum 18. "I told the believers that they can come to our church if they wish. And they do come to worship God on the property they bought with their own money. Services are spontaneous. You can't say anyone organises them. They take place whether I or Vasily are there or not."

While Yurevich was brought before the court for allegedly organising a service on 7 November, Pastor Goncharenko faces punishment for allegedly organising a service on 31 October, a charge he too rejects. The Minsk Moscow district court has already held several hearings on his case, most recently on 28 December, but again the case was adjourned. "They gave no new date but told me they will summon me," he told Forum 18.

Meanwhile, church members have vowed to protect their church with their own bodies if necessary if the authorities go ahead with their threat to demolish it. On 14 December, the church received a written warning from Nikolai Skipor, first deputy head of Moscow district administration, that any unauthorised repair work carried out by the congregation since it bought the church in 2002 would be demolished by local administration workers if not removed by 1 January. The letter, seen by Forum 18, also warned that the local administration will recover the cost of any such enforced demolition through the courts (see F18News 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477).

Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18 that the fire service has also begun looking for alleged violations of safety regulations in the church. "They have come twice already this month, just looking for excuses to close us down," he maintained. "They've warned us that this is wrong and that. They even telephoned again this morning."

But the pastor insists the congregation is not intimidated by the authorities. "We're ready for everything. We will stand up for our rights to worship God. This is all we want to do, and God will defend us."

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

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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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