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BELARUS: Charismatic pastor fined for organising "illegal" worship

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of the embattled Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church has been fined the equivalent of 30 times the minimum monthly wage in Belarus for organising religious services without state permission. Describing the brief court session to Forum 18 News Service, church administrator Vasily Yurevich complained that there was no opportunity to prepare or present a defence, since Pastor Goncharenko was summoned only the evening before the midday hearing and members of the congregation were not permitted to enter the courtroom. New Life was issued an official warning in December 2004 after Yurevich was himself fined on similar charges, and the church faces closure under Belarusian law should it receive a second such warning. While state officials have repeatedly denied to Forum 18 that they are waging a campaign against the 600-strong congregation, a 2000 state analysis of a sister charismatic congregation warns that it poses "a significant threat" to Belarusian society.

Found guilty of "violating the established procedure for holding religious events" (Article 167, Part 1 of the Belarusian Administrative Violations Code), Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of the charismatic New Life Church was fined 720,000 Belarusian roubles (approximately 2,090 Norwegian kroner, 255 Euros or 330 US dollars) on 22 March, the church's administrator, Vasily Yurevich, has told Forum 18 News Service.

Speaking from the Belarusian capital on 23 March, Yurevich told Forum 18 that a representative of Minsk's Moscow district court telephoned Pastor Goncharenko at home during the evening of 21 March and demanded his presence in court the following day, to which he responded by requesting a written summons. Soon afterwards, said Yurevich, a local police officer telephoned and repeated the court representative's demand, additionally threatening to fetch the pastor handcuffed if he did not comply. Pastor Goncharenko again responded by asking for a written summons, continued Yurevich, which was duly delivered to him later the same evening. Forum 18 has received a copy of the undated document, which states that Pastor Goncharenko's should attend court "in the capacity of law-breaker" at midday on 22 March.

According to Yurevich, 150 church members accompanied their pastor to the courthouse but were not admitted to the brief hearing as "the judge declared it closed." This circumstance – as well as the short interval between the summons and the hearing – meant that there was thus no opportunity to prepare or present any form of defence, he told Forum 18. "Once Pastor Goncharenko was admitted to the courtroom, a police officer blocked his exit. When the door opened again, the judge simply told those waiting in the corridor outside that it was all over and announced the verdict." Forum 18 has received a copy of the court's demand for Pastor Goncharenko to pay the Belarusian state the equivalent of 30 times the minimum monthly wage by 6 April 2005.

A previous Moscow district court hearing on 1 March attended by approximately 100 church members was unexpectedly adjourned for further police investigation with no indication of when the next session would take place (see F18News 16 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=525). After an initial aborted attempt in late 2004, the present charges were again levelled against Pastor Goncharenko on 25 January (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516).

In addition to an appeal against the fine, New Life is currently preparing formal complaints to the Belarusian Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Internal Affairs regarding irregular court procedure and police behaviour respectively, Yurevich told Forum 18. "The police treated church members roughly and tried to force them to leave the courthouse," he remarked.

Refused rental of premises by every district administration in Minsk by September 2004, the 600-strong New Life congregation has since been meeting for worship at a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002. The Minsk city authorities have denied the church permission to use this building for worship, to reconstruct it as a prayer house and to register at its address (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454 and 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477). Under the restrictive Belarusian 2002 religion law, all religious events require state permission unless held at a purpose-built house of worship.

After Vasily Yurevich was himself fined 150 times the minimum monthly wage on 28 December 2004 for allegedly organising

"illegal" religious services at the cowshed (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480), Minsk city administration issued New Life an official warning on 30 December (see F18News 25 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=498). Under the 2002 religion law, a second such warning would be sufficient to ban the church.

State officials at various levels have repeatedly told Forum 18 that New Life's predicament is "all their fault," that they cannot register or worship at the cowshed because "you can only keep cows in a cowshed," and that they cannot reconstruct the building either, due to the absence of a prayer house in municipal plans to develop the area already approved by President Aleksandr Lukashenko (see F18News 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477, 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516 and 16 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=525).

A March 2000 analysis of one of New Life's sister congregations by an expert at the Belarusian State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs concludes that it is a "neo-mystical religious-political destructive sect" whose growth poses "a significant threat to the individual, society and state" (see F18News 4 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186). (END)

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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