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BELARUS: Not liquidated, but unable to meet

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Although the authorities have so far held off from closing down two religious communities eligible for liquidation under the restrictive 2002 religion law - the charismatic New Life church and the Hare Krishna community in Minsk – officials have warned both communities not to meet. "We're afraid to meet at our temple," Sergei Malakhovsky of the 200-strong Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 News Service, pointing out that constant police checks would result in "a huge fine equivalent to approximately 1,500 US dollars". New Life church and the Hare Krishna communities in Minsk and Bobruisk are among many religious communities denied compulsory re-registration and whose activity is therefore illegal. In April the pastor of an unregistered Baptist church was also fined.

The Belarusian authorities appear to have stalled in their moves against the two religious organisations closest to liquidation under the country's restrictive 2002 religion law – the charismatic New Life Church and the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness. Nevertheless, the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness is currently unable to gather for worship, Sergei Malakhovsky of the community told Forum 18 News Service on 15 April. "We're afraid to meet at our temple," he explained, pointing out that constant police checks would result in "a huge fine equivalent to approximately 1,500 US dollars".

A fine of this size was handed down to the administrator of New Life Church late last year for allegedly organising worship without state approval (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480). Like New Life, the 200-strong Hare Krishna community has been refused compulsory re-registration at its house of worship because it does not have the necessary state approval to use the building.

The Minsk Hare Krishna temple is technically a free-standing residential house, although the community claims to have carried out thousands of dollars worth of improvements and alterations to the building since receiving initial registration there in 1992. The Krishna devotees who are registered as its legal occupants are currently the only people allowed to use it, Malakhovsky told Forum 18.

Malakhovsky also confirmed that Minsk city administration has not taken any further action against the community since issuing two official warnings in mid-November 2004 and on 14 February 2005, even though this constitutes sufficient legal grounds for liquidation. The first warning was issued after Minsk's Central District Court found that a religious meeting had taken place at the temple without state approval (see F18News 10 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=450).

In the second warning, a copy of which has been received by Forum 18, vice-chairman of Minsk city administration Mikhail Petrushin maintains that the community is "still situated" at the temple even though its legal appeal against the authorities' refusal to re-register it there has been rejected at all levels of the justice system. The Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness has lodged a further appeal with the United Nations Human Rights Committee (see F18News 27 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=500).

Malakhovsky also told Forum 18 that he is unaware of any measures taken by the state authorities against the Krishna Consciousness community in Bobruisk [Babruysk], which has also been refused re-registration (see F18News 27 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=500).

Speaking to Forum 18 on 10 May, Vasili Yurevich, the administrator of New Life Church, also said that the state authorities have taken no further action against the congregation since Minsk city administration issued its second warning to the church on 4 April (see F18News 8 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=540).

So far this year the Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in CIS countries – has documented only one fine against its member congregations in Belarus for conducting unregistered worship. Such incidents were more frequent in 2003-4 (see F18News 3 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=243 and 17 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=255).

On 26 April the association reported that 75-year-old Pastor Yevgeni Shishko refused to pay a fine of 75,000 Belarusian roubles

(218 Norwegian kroner, 27 Euros or 35 US dollars) handed down to him on 21 April by a district court in the western city of Brest for leading an unregistered religious organisation. Pastor Shishko confirmed to Forum 18 on 5 May that he had been leading a worship service in a private house on 28 February when a local policeman called and drew up a statement against him (leadership of an unregistered religious organisation is an administrative offence in Belarus). Sounding unconcerned, he stressed that he had encountered neither trouble nor further demands from the authorities since refusing to pay.

While Pastor Vladimir Gritsuk of an autonomous Baptist congregation in Bereza (Brest region) was similarly handed down a fine of 240,000 Belarusian roubles (698 Norwegian kroner, 86 Euros or 111 US dollars) for leading an unregistered religious organisation on 9 February 2005, this is "no longer relevant", Pastor Vladimir Zdanevich of a sister autonomous congregation in Brest told Forum 18 on 5 May. The two congregations are among five in Brest region who have roots in the Council of Churches Baptists association but who accepted state registration in the 1980s on condition of autonomy.

The five had had their re-registration applications returned to them after refusing to accept a provision in the 2002 religion law stipulating that a religious organisation may function only within the limit of the territory upon which it is registered, such as a city or group of villages (see F18News 27 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=500). However, all five were finally re-registered in late April with charters stipulating that the territory for their religious activity is unlimited, Zdanevich told Forum 18. "The charters were registered in the form we wanted – God has shown us great mercy."

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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