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BELARUS: Pressure on Minsk charismatic church resumes

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Vasily Yurevich, administrator of New Life charismatic church in Minsk, faces new charges of repeatedly organising "illegal" worship, five months after he was fined 150 times the minimum monthly wage for the same "offence". He told Forum 18 News Service he was summoned by police on 18 May to be informed of the new charges, two weeks after his appeal against the earlier fine was rejected. The church's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, has also been fined twice. The authorities say the church's use of a former cowshed for services is illegal as the building has not been designated for religious use. The 600-strong church has already been denied official registration, meaning that all its activity is therefore illegal. In April Minsk city administration issued the church with a third official warning, though two are enough for a court to close down a religious organisation.

Now that the early May state holidays are over, the Minsk authorities are again pursuing measures against the charismatic New Life Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Church administrator Vasily Yurevich told Forum 18 from the Belarusian capital on 19 May that officers at the city's Moscow District police station informed him the previous day that new charges of repeatedly organising "illegal" worship services are to be brought against him. Ten police officers turned up at the church during Sunday worship on 15 May and demanded that Yurevich attend the police station the following day, he told Forum 18, but he refused to do so without the written summons subsequently issued for 18 May.

New Life Church has also recently received a third official warning from Minsk city administration, a copy of which has been viewed by Forum 18. Dated 22 April and signed by administration vice-chairman Mikhail Petrushin, the warning cites a survey of the church's building compiled by a municipal land use commission on 16 February. This concluded that the congregation had violated the Land Code by not adhering to the building's designated usage of cowshed (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516). The latest warning comes after Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko failed to win an appeal against a fine of 72,000 Belarusian roubles (209 Norwegian kroner, 26 Euros or 33 US dollars) subsequently handed down for this alleged land code violation.

Refused rental of premises by every district administration in Minsk before September 2004, New Life Church has since been meeting for worship at a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002. The Minsk city authorities have denied the congregation 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 2002 religion law, all religious events require state permission unless held at a purpose-built house of worship.

Minsk city administration's first official warning to New Life came on 30 December 2004 (see F18News 25 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=498) after Yurevich was fined 3,200,000 Belarusian roubles (8,935 Norwegian kroner, 1,080 Euros or 1,470 US dollars) for organising religious services at the cowshed without official permission (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480). The administration issued its second warning on 4 April after Pastor Goncharenko was fined 720,000 Belarusian roubles (2,090 Norwegian kroner, 255 Euros or 330 US dollars) on 22 March for similarly organising and conducting unauthorised worship on 23 January and 20 February (see F18News 8 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=540). Under the restrictive 2002 religion law, two official warnings constitute grounds for the court liquidation of a religious organisation.

Pastor and church administrator have so far refused to pay the fines, as members of New Life's 600-strong congregation argue that no one can be considered the organiser of their meetings when "each person attends of their own initiative and free will". On 28 April, however, Yurevich received notification from Minsk City Court that his appeal against the 3,200,000-rouble fine of December 2004 has failed. According to the court's letter, a copy of which has been received by Forum 18, the appeal was rejected on the grounds that several police officers testified Yurevich to be the organiser of an illegal religious meeting held on 7 November 2004, while his protestations of innocence were dismissed as "having no objective corroboration and disproved by the aforementioned evidence". The court also maintains that the fine – equivalent to 150 times the minimum monthly wage – is in proportion to the administrative violation: "There are no extenuating circumstances."

Yurevich also told Forum 18 that Pastor Goncharenko was summoned to Minsk's Central District Court on 12 May and ordered to pay the two fines of 720,000 and 72,000 Belarusian roubles. While the pastor responded that he would consider paying the smaller

fine, said Yurevich, he informed court personnel that he has filed a new appeal against the larger one with Moscow District's public prosecutor.

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.

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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