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BELARUS: Minsk authorities to confiscate church land

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

City authorities in the capital Minsk have told the embattled charismatic New Life church that the land it bought with its church building in 2002 is to be confiscated. The city claims the congregation is using the land on which the church stands "not in accordance with its designation", Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "Our members have paid 13,000 US dollars in taxes on it – they can't say that it's not ours," New Life's administrator Vasily Yurevich told Forum 18. At a 30 August meeting, church members decided to begin a round-the-clock prayer vigil, challenge the proposed confiscation in court and launch a campaign to keep their land. The church has been denied re-registration by the authorities which under Belarusian law, in defiance of international human rights agreements, renders all activity by the 600-strong congregation illegal.

New Life, the Minsk-based charismatic church forced to meet at its disused cowshed for worship services, looks set to have the land beneath that building confiscated by the municipal authorities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "They have declared war on us, but we will not give up our land," New Life's administrator Vasily Yurevich remarked to Forum 18 on 30 August. "Our members have paid 13,000 US Dollars in taxes on it – they can't say that it's not ours." The average monthly salary in Belarus is estimated to be around 303,000 Belarusian roubles (885 Norwegian kroner, 108 Euros, or 139 US Dollars). Church members have begun a prayer vigil and plan to defend their land.

In a letter dated 23 August but received by the church six days later, Minsk City Executive Committee vice-chairman Mikhail Petrushin announces that body's 17 August decision to confiscate the plot of land beneath the disused cowshed. Viewed by Forum 18, the text of the decision explains that New Life's right to the plot – originally granted by the municipal authorities along with its purchase in 2002 – is to be cancelled because the church's use of the land is "inappropriate" and "not in accordance with its designation". It orders relevant municipal departments to "take measures by 1 September to regulate the issue of purchasing from New Life Church the property [cowshed] situated on the aforementioned plot" and to make a financial proposal for this purchase once the building's value has been determined.

While the decision suggests that any action would be taken after 1 September, Yurevich told Forum 18 on 31 August that the church has not been contacted by any state department since it received the text. At an emergency meeting on 30 August, New Life members nevertheless decided to conduct a round-the-clock prayer vigil and alert other churches, foreign embassies and human rights organisations, he said, while a conference bringing together members of 50 other Belarusian charismatic churches affiliated to the Full Gospel Association is planned in support of New Life on 10 September.

Yurevich also reported that the church has invited Minsk city executive committee chairman Mikhail Pavlov to explain to the 600-strong congregation the motivation behind his and his colleagues' decision at their 4 September Sunday service. "We believe this move to confiscate the land is illegal and we intend to challenge it in court," he remarked to Forum 18, accusing the state authorities of being biased against the church. "There are plenty of commercial organisations in Minsk based at cultural institutions which have nothing to do with culture, but no one challenges them for 'inappropriate usage!'"

New Life Church has been worshipping at the disused cowshed ever since being barred from renting a local house of culture in September 2004. As Vasily Yurevich told procuracy officials in December 2004, the church was earlier refused requests to rent other public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk. The 2002 religion law requires state permission for religious gatherings in premises not specially designed for worship, but the Minsk municipal authorities have consistently refused to grant both this – on the grounds that the building is a cowshed – as well as permission to reconstruct the building as a church, latterly maintaining that it is to be demolished as part of Minsk's general development plan (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516).

Without the necessary state approval to meet at their disused cowshed, New Life Church was refused compulsory re-registration at its address as soon as the religion law's 16 November 2004 re-registration deadline expired (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454) Subsequently, both Vasily Yurevich and Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko have been repeatedly charged with organising illegal worship (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480, 23 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=530 and 19 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=565), most recently following a visit by police officers to the church's

24 July Sunday service.

New Life's attempt to re-register in June 2005 similarly proved unsuccessful. Viewed by Forum 18, a letter dated 17 August from the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs explained to Pastor Goncharenko that this was because the disused cowshed "is in an unsatisfactory condition" – which Yurevich disputes – and that, in violation of the 2002 religion law, the church failed to enclose the signatures of all its "participants (members)" in the application. The law does not stipulate how the term "participant (member)" differs from the minimum 20 citizens who found a religious organisation, however, and Yurevich told Forum 18 that those names were submitted.

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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