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BELARUS: New spate of Pentecostal fines

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Aleksandr Tolochko was fined 34 US dollars in Grodno on 4 June as part of the latest crackdown on Pentecostal home meetings in various towns and villages of western Belarus. "He hasn't paid the fine yet – he doesn't earn enough to pay it," Bishop Fyodor Tsvor of Grodno region told Forum 18 News Service. Among others fined were two Pentecostal women in Baranovichi, one a pensioner and one an invalid. Bishop of Brest region Nikolai Kurkaev blamed the highly restrictive new religion law. "You see the new law is working already," he told Forum 18. Igor Popov, religious affairs officials for Grodno region, denied to Forum 18 there is a campaign against Pentecostals but insisted all unregistered religious meetings are illegal.

In a new crackdown on Pentecostal home meetings in various towns and villages of western Belarus, a series of fines has been handed down on church members who allow their homes to be used for prayers meetings. "This is the only place in Belarus where this is happening at the moment," the head of the Pentecostal Union, Bishop Sergei Khomich, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Minsk on 20 June. "But it could get worse." Among those fined were two women in the town of Baranovichi in Brest region, one an invalid and the other a pensioner. Bishop of Brest region Nikolai Kurkaev blamed the highly restrictive new religion law, passed last year. "You see the new law is working already," he told Forum 18 on 20 June.

Police have already broken up religious meetings since the new religion law came into force last November and issued warnings and fines (see F18News 10 June 2003). In addition, the government signed an agreement with the Orthodox Church on 12 June which many other religious communities fear will further reduce their rights.

The most recent Pentecostal fine was handed down on 4 June by the administrative commission of Grodno's Lenin district. Aleksandr Tolochko was fined 70,000 Belarusian roubles (238 Norwegian kroner, 29 Euros or 34 US dollars) under Article 193 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes unregistered religious activity. "He hasn't paid the fine yet – he doesn't earn enough to pay it," Fyodor Tsvor, bishop of Grodno region, told Forum 18 on 20 June.

He said Tolochko has appealed against the fine, which was handed down after police raided a house rented by the Pentecostal Church in the nearby village of Zheludok. Three police officers and the religious affairs official from the local administration arrived at the house at 1 am on a night in early May and drew up a protocol against Tolochko for leading "illegal" services.

Pentecostal evangelist Mikhail Balyk from Molodechno was fined 26,600 roubles on 27 May for his work in Zheludok (see F18News 3 June 2003).

"It is very worrying that the police came in the middle of the night," Bishop Khomich declared. Bishop Tsvor agreed. "They came illegally. Services have not even begun in the village," he insisted. "Friends come along, drink tea and talk about the Bible." He said the authorities "don't want a Pentecostal church there".

District administration information officer Sergei Kasperchuk told Forum 18 from Shchuchin on 20 June that local religious affairs commissioner Yuri Yereminovich was on holiday. But he rejected suggestions that the Pentecostals are being targeted. "There is no campaign against them – certainly not." He insisted though that they could only meet if they register. "No-one is stopping them from registering in accordance with the law," he declared. He claimed (wrongly) that in every European country believers must register with the authorities to be able to meet (Belarus is the only European country that requires this, in defiance of international human rights commitments).

Igor Popov, religious affairs commissioner for Grodno region, likewise denied any campaign against Pentecostals. After initially claiming he could not remember the fines imposed on Tolochko and Balyk and declaring that "we don't have the practice of fining believers", he then admitted the two had been fined. "Our law specifies that religious meetings can only take place after registration," Popov told Forum 18 on 20 June. Told that this violates Belarus' international human rights commitments which, article 40 of the religion law declares, override all other provisions of the religion law, he responded: "If you live in Rome you must live according to Roman law." He maintained there were "no restrictions" on the Pentecostals, pointing to what he said was the Church's "faster, more dynamic growth" than with other Churches.

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Meanwhile in neighbouring Brest region there have been four attempts to fine Pentecostals for home meetings. One home owner in the village of Khotislav close to the southern border with Ukraine was twice handed down fines earlier this year by the local administration, but each time the local court annulled the fine, Bishop Kurkaev reported. "The court ruled that the fines had been handed down illegally."

In Baranovichi, police came to the home of pensioner Anna Lukashenya and on 18 April she was fined 20,000 roubles by the local administration for hosting religious meetings. "If people drink, everyone says they are OK, but if they pray they want them to be punished," Pastor Sergei Poznyakovich quoted Lukashenya as declaring. He told Forum 18 from Baranovichi on 20 June that Lukashenya is a simple woman and when she received the order handing down the fine she went and paid it. "She could have challenged the fine in court, but she didn't," Poznyakovich reported. He said the pastor went to the police about the case, but they said it was right that she had been fined.

At the end of May invalid Yevgeniya Savashchenya was fined 5,000 roubles under Article 193 for hosting meetings in her home. "A police officer came to her home and forced her to write a statement," Poznyakovich reported. "She wrote that she was an invalid, but they still fined her." He said Savashchenya has not paid the fine and that he has taken up her case with the administration. "I went there today and explained she is an invalid," he told Forum 18. "I showed them the religion law which allows us to visit invalids in their homes and they promised to review the case on Monday."

Pastor Poznyakovich insisted neither Lukashenya nor Savashchenya had done anything wrong. "The meetings did not go on late, nor were they loud. People met as friends, prayed, read the Bible and sang hymns. That is all. These were not official services." He said "of course" believers should be allowed to meet in private homes for religious meetings.

Bishop Kurkaev believes the fines are part of a "real campaign". "It will only get worse," he told Forum 18. "No-one touched us before – no-one was interested." Bishop Tsvor agrees, linking the campaign to implementation of the new law. "I believe the new law gives a privileged position to the Orthodox Church. Protestants are put at a disadvantage," he maintained. "They're allowed everything, we're allowed nothing."

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY

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