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BELARUS: Catholic priest expelled and pressure on Baptists mounts

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Catholic priest Fr. Robert Krzywicki, who was ordered with another priest in mid-December 2005 to leave Belarus by the end of the year, left the country on 27 December. He had served as a priest in the town of Borisov [Barysaw], north-east of the capital Minsk, for 12 years, and his supporters gathered with flowers and gifts on the steps of the parish church to see him off. No reason was given for the decision and Fr. Krzywicki told Forum 18 News Service that "I committed no crime." Baptists from across the country have told Forum 18 that pressure has also begun to mount on their congregations. In western Belarus for example, a member of a small village congregation told Forum 18 from Brest that "there are incidents all over the place. We don't know why things changed for the worse, but we don't believe the pressure has ended." Church members have appealed to the authorities in Brest and the capital Minsk against violations of their rights.

Catholic priest Fr. Robert Krzywicki left Belarus on 27 December 2005, to return to his native Poland, after working as a priest in the town of Borisov [Barysaw], north-east of the capital Minsk, for 12 years. Together with another Catholic priest, he was ordered in mid-December to leave Belarus by the end of 2005, after officials refused to renew his visa. His parishioners launched a nationwide petition against the expulsion (see F18News 22 December 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=710>). Fr. Krzywicki's supporters gathered with flowers and gifts on the steps of the parish church where he had served, to see him off.

According to the local website myborisov.net, by the day of his departure more than a thousand signatures had been collected on a petition for the authorities to change their mind and allow him to stay. It said no reason had been given as to why the visa extension had been refused. Fr. Krzywicki was himself not given a reason for the decision and told Forum 18 News Service that "I committed no crime."

Meanwhile, members of the Council of Churches Baptists have told Forum 18 that pressure has also begun to mount on their congregations across Belarus. In eastern Belarus, the congregation in Bobruisk [Babruysk], Mogilev [Mahilyow] region, has protested at the official campaign of fines and harassment conducted against the congregation and one of its families. The official primarily responsible has denied this to Forum 18, claiming to have "excellent relations" with the church (see F18News 6 January 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=712>).

In western Belarus, "pressure was stepped up about six months ago," one member of a small village congregation told Forum 18 from Brest region on 5 January. "There are incidents all over the place. We don't know why things changed for the worse, but we don't believe the pressure has ended." Church members have appealed to the authorities in Brest and the capital Minsk against violations of their rights.

Pastor Valeri Ryzhuk, who leads the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Drogichin [Dragichyn] in Brest region, agrees. "Since last summer pressure - including warnings, threats and fines - has increased," he told Forum 18 on 5 January. "The authorities keep trying to force us to register, but this is against the Bible and against our consciences. It represents interference in our church life and is a violation of our human rights. When the law of God and the secular law diverge we have to follow the law of God." He says he and his colleagues always refuse to pay fines imposed for religious activity as they are not guilty of any crime. Congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries.

But Pastor Ryzhuk insists that he and his fellow Baptists are loyal citizens. "We pray for our country's authorities," he told Forum 18. "We simply want to worship God in accordance with our principles."

"Recently, persecution of believers is increasing in our country," members of the Baptist Council of Churches congregation in Malorita in Brest region wrote on 21 December. "We are being accused of breaking the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations, which limits the freedom to preach the Gospel and live according to the Word of God. In addition, it requires churches to undergo compulsory registration, to which we cannot agree."

The Malorita church complained of orders "from above" to ban churches from meeting in private homes. It cited a 1 December summons to Pastor Vladimir Burshtyn to attend the local police station, where a statement was drawn up accusing him of leading an unregistered congregation. On 13 December an administrative commission fined him 10,000 Belarusian Roubles (30 Norwegian Kroner, 4 Euros or 5 US Dollars) under Article 193 of the administrative code.

When Pastor Ryzhuk in Drogichin in Brest region was fined 51,000 Belarusian Roubles (154 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros or 24 US Dollars) on 9 June 2005 for leading an unregistered service, he refused to pay the fine, considering that he had done nothing wrong (see F18News 28 September 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=661>). He told Forum 18 that two court executors visited his home on 2 December and seized an oil heater worth 140,000 Belarusian Roubles (427 Norwegian Kroner, 54 Euros or 65 US Dollars), more than double the value of the fine.

The authorities in Brest region have shown concern about their failure to stamp out unauthorised religious activity. An 18 January 2005 report by the region's top religious affairs official Vasili Marchenko, on the religious situation in the region during 2004 clearly showed how upset he was that officials were not in his view active enough in breaking up worship services and in other ways harassing, fining and controlling religious communities and believers (see F18News 18 November 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=691>).

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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