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BELARUS: Unregistered Baptist churches face Monday "disbandment" deadline

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Police in at least one region of Belarus will halt the activity of a network of Baptist churches that do not wish to register with the authorities if they fail to register by the end of the month under the restrictive 2002 religion law. "Destructive sects" will be "disbanded", Vladimir Marchenko, an official in Brest region, told Forum 18 News Service. He said his December 2003 instruction to local officials and the police "to halt the illegal activity of members of unregistered Baptist organisations" by 1 March was based on a countrywide order from the Justice Ministry. Baptists in Brest region have complained of growing "persecution". Forum 18 has been unable to find out if similar instructions have been issued in other regions. The crackdown comes amid rising levels of fines on Baptist and other Protestant pastors who have led unregistered religious services.

"Destructive sects conducting religious propaganda" will be "disbanded" if they fail to register by 1 March, a regional official has told Forum 18 News Service. The secretary of the department responsible for co-ordinating the activity of administrative organs in the country's southwestern Brest region, Vladimir Marchenko, explained to Forum 18 on 25 February that his 22 December 2003 instruction to this effect was not a local initiative, but the implementation of an order issued to all regional administrations by the Ministry of Justice in the capital Minsk.

In a 12 February statement received by Forum 18, the Brest regional council of the International Union of Baptist Churches quotes Marchenko's 22 December instruction, which ordered regional police departments both to ensure implementation of the repressive 2002 religion law and "to halt the illegal activity of members of unregistered Baptist organisations belonging to the so-called 'International Council of Churches' by 1 March 2004." It went on to list ten locations in Brest region where such congregations function.

The International Union of Baptist Churches, commonly referred to by the name of its ruling body, the Council of Churches, adheres to a rigid principle of separation of church and state, according to which none of its current 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union are registered. It believes such registration leads to unacceptable state meddling in its activity.

Contacted by Forum 18 earlier on 25 February, the chairman of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs had no knowledge of the order issued by Brest region. "No official instructions to that effect exist - you have received false information," remarked Stanislav Buko, before emphasising that religious organisations have until the end of 16 November to register according to the 2002 religion law. When Forum 18 queried with Marchenko why he had therefore set an earlier deadline, he could answer only that the date of 1 March was "what the Ministry decided".

Also in their 12 February statement, the Brest Baptists maintain that "persecution" of their believers began in the wake of Marchenko's instruction. Thus, a police officer called at the home of their 74-year-old pastor in Rogozna village (one of the locations listed by Marchenko) on 29 December 2003 and enquired whether a Catholic priest lived there. When Pyotr Tkachuk said he was a Baptist pastor, the police officer reportedly announced that he had come to draw up a statement against him. The Baptists maintain that this statement - "which in fact had already been written" - said that Tkachuk had created and led a religious organisation at 11 am on 29 December 2003 without registering its charter and "conducted special children's and youth meetings unrelated to the performance of the cult".

Forum 18 notes that this phrasing duplicates Article 193 of the code of administrative offences (which is itself derived from Soviet-era provisions). This punishes both "the creation and leadership of a religious organisation without registering its charter (statutes) in accordance with established procedure" and "the organisation and conducting by leaders and members of such an organisation of special children's and youth meetings, as well as work, literary and other circles and groups unrelated to the performance of the cult" with a fine of up to five times the minimum monthly wage - currently 17,500 Belarusian roubles (58 Norwegian kroner, 7 Euros or 8 US dollars).

The Brest Baptists add that while the police statement against Tkachuk included the names of two local witnesses, neither the visiting officer nor these alleged witnesses had ever set foot in the Rogozna prayer house, which has stood in the village since 1923.

On 9 February, however, Brest district administrative commission nevertheless fined Tkachuk 35,000 Belarusian roubles (116 Norwegian kroner, 14 Euros or 16 US dollars) on the basis of the statement. The Brest Baptists point out that the pastor's monthly pension is a mere 90,000 Belarusian roubles (298 Norwegian kroner, 36 Euros or 41 US dollars).

Elsewhere in their 12 February statement, the Brest Baptists refer to two further incidents which occurred at locations listed in Marchenko's instruction shortly after it was issued. In the town of Malorita, they maintain, a pastor was invited to a meeting of the local commission monitoring compliance with legislation on religion on 21 January, where he was informed that he had a month in which to register his church in accordance with the law. If he failed to do so, he was reportedly warned, measures would be taken to halt the church's activity.

In the second incident, the Baptists relate how a police officer encountered a member of their local congregation in Tomashovka village and warned him that a statement had been drawn up against him. On 9 February the Baptist's brother (who shares the same initials) was reportedly summoned to a hearing of Brest district administrative commission in connection with his leadership of an unregistered religious organisation, but no verdict was reached.

A spokeswoman for the International Union of Baptist Churches in the Russian capital Moscow told Forum 18 on 26 February that her organisation did not know whether its Belarusian congregations outside Brest region were facing a similar crackdown, nor whether there existed instructions analogous to Vladimir Marchenko's in regions other than Brest.

The last few months have seen an upsurge in fines on Baptist pastors in various parts of the country (see F18News 17 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=255). Although the 2002 religion law does not appear to have been specifically targeted at them, the unregistered Baptists appear to have been its most prominent victims so far.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

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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