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RUSSIA: Has bulldozing threat to Baptist church receded?

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

A 19 April court hearing against Yelena Kareyeva - owner of a Baptist church in the village of Lyubuchany near Moscow whose construction the authorities say was "unauthorised" - was cancelled. Moscow-based Baptist pastor Nikolai Dudenkov told Forum 18 News Service that no future hearing was mentioned nor was any explanation given at the courthouse for the cancellation. Local Baptists hope the authorities' threat to bulldoze the new church - built to replace the previous church destroyed last September in an arson attack some believe was state-initiated - have now receded. The plight of the Baptists has gained international attention, with two US congressmen writing to the local authorities in February to complain about official attempts to prevent the rebuilding of the church. But a 5 March letter from Moscow region prosecutor's office defends the actions of the local authorities.

Threats by the state authorities in Moscow region's Chekhov district to bulldoze a Baptist prayer house built to replace one destroyed by arson appear to have receded, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A 19 April local court hearing against the owner of the new prayer house, Yelena Kareyeva, "was cancelled, thank God," Moscow-based Baptist pastor Nikolai Dudenkov told Forum 18 on 20 April. There was neither mention of a future hearing nor any explanation given at the courthouse for the cancellation, he added.

Seeking clarification, Forum 18 was directed by Chekhov district public prosecutor's office to Chekhov district court on 22 April, where a secretary insisted that only Judge Svetlana Tsvirko could provide further information. Judge Tsvirko's telephone went unanswered on 22 and 25 April.

Kareyeva's application for permission to rebuild following the September 2004 arson attack in Chekhov district's village of Lyubuchany remaining unanswered, the Council of Churches Baptists have now almost completed a replacement prayer house on the previous site - and have documented repeated state threats to remove it. On 12 November 2004, for example, officers of the local police department for wanted criminals reportedly visited Kareyeva bearing a written demand that construction of the new prayer house be curtailed: "Instead of pursuing the law by investigating the arson attack on our building, we were warned that it would all end with a suit being filed and a court decision made to remove our building with bulldozers!"

On 30 January 2005, the Council of Churches Baptists announced that Chekhov district administration had indeed filed suit against Kareyeva, ordering the removal of the "unauthorised construction" on her land. A hearing scheduled for 2 February did not take place, however, since Chekhov administration reportedly failed to send a representative to the court, and was postponed to 19 April.

The Lyubuchany Baptists maintain that they held worship services at their old private prayer house - something permitted to unregistered religious groups under Russian law - "for many years without disturbing anyone". Like other communities in CIS countries belonging to the Council of Churches Baptists, the 50-strong congregation refuses on principle to register with the state authorities.

There is some suggestion that the state authorities were linked to the arson attack. Interviewed by Forum 18 shortly afterwards, Yelena Kareyeva mentioned that her teenage sons had seen the same plain clothes officer who dislocated the finger of a young Baptist during the break-up of a late August 2004 religious convention in the village loitering near the prayer house three days before it was burnt down (see F18News 22 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=417). In their statement on the 12 November 2004 police visit, the Lyubuchany Baptists maintain that, just as before the September attack, "unknown persons" are keeping constant watch on them.

The Lyubuchany Baptists' predicament has since become the focus of international attention. On 18 February 2005 two United States congressmen who chair the Washington-based Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe wrote to Chekhov district administration expressing concern regarding the allegations of violence against the Lyubuchany congregation and governmental efforts to prevent the reconstruction of its worship facility. "We are particularly alarmed by reports that government officials are now suing the Baptists in Chekhov District Court to prevent them from rebuilding their church," states the letter. "We urge your administration to vigorously investigate the arson case and to fully prosecute the perpetrators, rather than the victims, and work to facilitate the rebuilding process." The situation featured prominently in the Commission's 14 April 2005 hearing on the status of unregistered religious groups in Russia (for Forum 18's statement to this hearing, see F18News 14 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=543).

In a 5 March 2005 response to a complaint from California representatives of the Council of Churches Baptists, Moscow Region public prosecutor's office defends the action of the Chekhov district authorities. The response, of which Forum 18 has received a copy, insists that Chekhov public prosecutor's office is investigating the arson attack. It also points out that, in accordance with Russia's 1997 religion law, religious meetings not taking place at houses of worship or their adjacent territory, other premises offered to religious organisations for religious purposes or belonging to them, pilgrimage sites, cemeteries or private homes are subject to the law on demonstrations, which requires organisers of public events to notify the local state authorities in advance.

Since, according to Moscow Region public prosecutor's office, the Lyubuchany land rented to Baptist Viktor Chekanov "was offered for agricultural purposes and not intended for him to use for a large-scale religious service," the August 2004 gathering of 5,000 worshippers at this site without notifying the local authorities in advance constituted a violation of the law. (While also noting that Russia's 2002 extremism law forbids demonstrations from being accompanied by "extremist activity", the letter does not state in what way this relates to the Baptists' convention.) Although Russia's 2004 demonstrations law requires state authorities to prevent unsanctioned meetings from taking place, continues the prosecutor's office, "Chekhov district administration, police and other security agencies did not take any decision to end the meeting by force."

The 5 March letter also maintains that, since the Baptists' event was unsanctioned and involved a large concentration of people on unsuitable territory, "unforeseen circumstances, terrorist attacks or provocation" could have occurred, which led to the decision to send representatives of the law enforcement agencies "to regulate proceedings and ensure the security of those citizens present". According to Chekhov's police and FSB security police departments, it states, "no force was used against participants in the worship service, and no one was prosecuted or detained."

The Council of Churches Baptists maintain that the law enforcement agencies tried but failed to end their August 2004 religious gathering and that their behaviour was rough and threatening (see F18News 22 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=417).

Of particular note in the response from Moscow Region public prosecutor's office is the statement that the Council of Churches Baptists "is not registered in the legally prescribed manner" which, it claimed, "constitutes a gross violation of the law". In fact, there is no legal requirement in Russia for religious communities to register.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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