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BELARUS: Pastor freed from prison, but another to be jailed?

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

In the wake of his 13 March release from prison in the capital Minsk after completing a ten-day sentence, Baptist pastor Georgi Vyazovsky said fellow-prisoners and warders were "amazed" he had been locked up for conducting worship in his own home. "They'd never had such a case before - one of the staff remarked that the judge must have gone crazy," he told Forum 18 News Service. Some 30 Protestant supporters who had gathered at the prison to welcome him on his release were roughly moved away, as 20 special police stood by. To Forum 18's knowledge, Pastor Vyazovsky is the first person to have been imprisoned for religious worship on the territory of Belarus for some twenty years, but at least one further prosecution appears imminent. Pentecostal bishop Sergei Tsvor is facing the same charges of conducting illegal services although his congregation in Minsk has official registration.

Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky of Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church was freed from a Minsk prison for Administrative Violations Code offenders shortly after midday local time today (13 March) on completion of a ten-day sentence for conducting religious worship in his own home. Shortly after his release, Pastor Vyazovsky told Forum 18 News Service he felt "splendid" and even joked that he had lost weight due to the "good diet". Held in cells with five and then 13 other inmates, he also said that both they and the warders were "amazed" that he was there for religious activity: "They'd never had such a case before - one of the staff remarked that the judge must have gone crazy."

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Fellow Reformed Baptist pastor Vladimir Bukanov told Forum 18 on 13 March that approximately 30 members of various Protestant churches gathered at 11.30am to meet Pastor Vyazovsky, but were roughly moved some 400 metres (yards) away from the prison by police, while some 20 special police officers stood by.

On 10 March a meeting of Baptist Union pastors in Brest region wrote to President Aleksandr Lukashenko and other top state representatives calling Pastor Vyazovsky's arrest and detention "a disgrace". Leaders of the charismatic Full Gospel Association also expressed their concern at Pastor Vyazovsky's sentence in an open statement published on 13 March.

A combination of restrictions contained in the Administrative Violations Code (Article 167) and the 2002 religion law bans all but occasional and small-scale religious meetings in private homes, and religious activity outside designated houses of worship unless it has advance approval from the state authorities. A first offence is punishable by either a warning, a fine of between 20 and 150 times the minimum monthly wage or three to 15 days' imprisonment. A repeat offence within one year is punishable by either a fine of between 150 and 300 times the minimum monthly wage or ten to 15 days' imprisonment.

On 25 November 2005 Partisan District Court issued a warning to Pastor Vyazovsky following police check-ups on his home services on 26 May 2005 and 30 October 2005 (see F18News 15 December 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=705>). An appeal against the court's decision was rejected by Minsk City Court on 10 January 2006. Following a raid on the Sunday service at his Minsk home on 5 February, Pastor Vyazovsky was sentenced on 3 March under Article 167 of the Administrative Violations Code (see F18News 6 March 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=737>).

Pastor Vyazovsky confirmed to Forum 18 on 13 March that there has been no further attempt to prosecute church members since his conviction.

Forum 18 has learnt, however, that the Pentecostal bishop of Minsk region is now also threatened with prosecution under Article 167. Sergei Tsvor, who is also first vice-chairman of the Pentecostal Union and pastor of the Minsk-based Good News Church, told Forum 18 on 13 March that police visited the free-standing residential house where his 100-strong congregation meets during a service some six weeks ago. When an officer drew up a protocol against the bishop on the grounds that he had no right to lead the gathering under the law on public demonstrations, "I told them that it wasn't a demonstration or a picket, but a worship service," Tsvor told Forum 18. "I can't understand it."

He confirmed that Good News Church is re-registered at the house under the 2002 religion law, for which a document confirming a religious community's right to be situated at its address is required. (Even though the same law prohibits systematic and large-scale religious meetings in private homes, some religious organisations have in practice managed to re-register at free-standing residential houses.)

Under the 2003 demonstrations law, all public events require the advance permission of the local state authorities, while the 2002 religion law states that religious events - if not in designated places of worship - may take place only after a corresponding decision by the local authorities. It would thus appear that permission to hold individual services is being interpreted as separate from that already received by Good News Church to be situated at a residential address. If so, this is the first such case of which Forum 18 is aware.

Summoned to a hearing at Minsk's Moscow District Court at 2pm on 9 March, Bishop Tsvor told Forum 18 that the judge had been busy with another case and told him he would be summoned again. He has heard nothing since, however.

There was no answer at Moscow District Court when Forum 18 rang on 13 March.

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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