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RUSSIA: Violence, arson and religious believers

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Police in the traditionally Buddhist Russian republic of Tuva seem to be indifferent to violent attacks on Protestants. Pastor Aleksandr Degtyarev of Gospel Light Baptist Church, told Forum 18 News Service that "for them it is minor - they have too many murders to solve." The republic's crime rate is amongst the highest in Russia, with two-and-a-half times more murders than the national average. Physical attacks against religious believers are uncommon elsewhere in Russia, but there has in recent years been an apparent increase in cases of arson attacks on places of worship reported by Orthodox, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Jewish and Muslim communities. In some cases, police investigations have resulted in prosecution, but in others police either fail to investigate or refuse to acknowledge that arson has taken place. The director of the Moscow-based Baptist Association for Spiritual Renewal, Valentin Vasilizhenko, suggested to Forum 18 that arsonists might prefer to attack places of worship, because the repercussions against them would be far less serious than if they attacked a bank or a business.

Police in the traditionally Buddhist Russian republic of Tuva, bordering north-west Mongolia, have not responded to violent attacks on Protestants, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Speaking in the capital Kyzyl on 1 July, translator of the Bible into Tuvan Vitali Voinov said that Pastor Aleksandr Degtyarev of his Gospel Light Baptist Church always reported the occasional but serious incidents, but police officers were indifferent: "For them it is minor - they have too many murders to solve."

According to an April 2005 Tuvan government report, the republic's crime rate is amongst the highest in the Russian Federation, with two-and-a-half times more murders than the national average.

Vitali Voinov told Forum 18 that most of the attacks on Protestants occurred between 1997 and 2003, when Gospel Light and the similarly Kyzyl-based River of Life Pentecostal Church screened the Jesus Film at locations throughout Tuva. While some residents attended and welcomed the showings, reports sent to Voinov by local pastors relate how others beat up and threatened to kill church members. Such was the case in Barlyk (western Tuva) in 2003, when villagers also interrupted the film and dispersed those present, accusing them of "betraying Buddha and the nation" by following "the Russian religion". In the same year, Baptist Raisa Kechil-Ool was wounded by a man with a knife at her church in nearby Ak-Dovurak.

While the inhabitants of Kara-Khaak, 20km [12 miles] north of Kyzyl, threatened and drove away church members after a local Buddhist lama told them that the high mortality and illness in their settlement were due to the spread of Christianity there, Voinov told Forum 18 that violence was not usually led by Buddhist leaders. Buddhist believers responding to a 2003 sociological survey by Novosibirsk-based academics Boris Myshlyavtsev and Zhanna Yusha partly put their resentment of Christianity down to the allegedly Christian practice of destroying ova (shaman cairns). A female Protestant preacher, however, told them that the only such incident occurred when a woman who organised the construction of an ova destroyed it following her conversion to Christianity.

Speaking to Forum 18 at Kyzyl's Tsechenling Buddhist temple on 1 July, former kamby-lama (head Buddhist of Tuva) Norbu-Sambuu Mart-Ool declined to comment on Protestant activity in Tuva, other than to say that Buddhists did have problems with mostly Tuvan Protestants.

Tuva's main religious affairs official Kambaa Biche-Ool assured Forum 18 the same day that the republic's 17 Protestant organisations function freely unless they violate their own charters and/or the Russian Constitution, in which case the local authorities file suit for their liquidation. Tuva's largest Christian church disbanded under pressure from the authorities (see F18News 18 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=609), who also closed down the republic's only Christian children's home (see F18News 25 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=615).

However, the Tuvan government website expresses similar views to opponents of Protestant mission in the republic. Its religion section states that "after the start of the changes and development of democracy in the early 1990s, religious Protestant organisations reputed to be constructive [sic] sects penetrated Tuva, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, evangelical Pentecostal Christians and Baptists, the worldwide Unification Church and other communities. Approximately 900 indigenous Tuvans - or 0.43 per cent of the population - have entered these so-called newly formed trends of religious confessions due to a lack of knowledge about their own traditional beliefs."

Elder preacher Buyan Khomushku of the Kyzyl-based Good News (formerly Sun Bok Ym) Charismatic Church – which has affiliate communities in ten locations in Tuva – told Forum 18 on 1 July that church members might be challenged verbally about why they were not preaching Buddhism, but had not encountered physical violence. Nor had Pastor Dmitri Ryabov of the similarly Kyzyl-based Glorification Pentecostal Church.

While physical attacks against religious believers are uncommon in other parts of Russia, in recent years there has been an apparent increase in cases of arson on places of worship reported by Orthodox, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Jewish and Muslim communities. Forum 18 has been able to find reports of only a couple of such incidents in each of 2001 and 2002, but 14 in 2003, nine in 2004 (see eg. F18News 11 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=251 and 22 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=417), and five so far in 2005, as well as undocumented references to more. Forum 18 is not aware of any arson attacks on Catholic churches.

In some cases, such as the arson attacks on an Orthodox church in Kamchatka region in August 2004 and a synagogue on the outskirts of Moscow in May 2005, police investigations have resulted in prosecution. In others, however, police either fail to investigate – such as, as a resident of Chendek village (southern Altai Republic) told Forum 18 on 25 June, in the case of an Orthodox chapel burnt down shortly after construction – or else refuse to acknowledge that arson has taken place. Orthodox priests in both Arkhangelsk and Tver regions have complained that police played down presumed Satanist attacks on their churches in February 2004 and January 2005 respectively. In the former, the fire brigade also reportedly maintained that the fire was the result of carelessness, even though the parish priest had previously found defaced icons and mutilated cats left nearby.

Sometimes arson victims – such as an unregistered Baptist church in Arkhangelsk – additionally complain that the fire brigade arrives late or unprepared. This may not be unusual, however, as Forum 18 has heard of a private individual's emergency call for an ambulance being refused in Moscow region.

In other cases, such as the arson attacks on a Baptist church in Blagoveshchensk (Amur region) in December 2004 and a Pentecostal church in Yaroslavl region in April 2005, police do confirm arson and open an investigation. In April 2005, however, religious rights lawyer Anatoli Pchelintsev remarked to Forum 18 that such investigations "never result in anything". While he was aware of some 20 incidents of attempted arson on places of worship in 2004, he remarked, not one has led to prosecution. In Balashikha (Moscow region), where a Baptist church was targeted in May 2003 and February 2004, police officers concluded that the fire was caused by a short circuit, pointed out Pchelintsev, even though bottles of flammable liquid were later discovered at the site by church members.

Speaking to Forum 18 in March 2005, however, director of the Moscow-based Baptist Association for Spiritual Renewal estimated that the number of arson attacks on places of worship in Russia had fallen. Albeit sometimes slowly, the state authorities did normally respond to such incidents, maintained Valentin Vasilizhenko. He suggested that arsonists might prefer to attack places of worship because the repercussions against them would be far less serious than if they attacked a bank or a business.

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

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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