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USCIRF continues to monitor the situation in Belarus, where the government tightly regulates religious communities through an extensive security and religious affairs bureaucracy, which has driven some religious groups underground. Officials are particularly hostile towards religious groups viewed as political opponents, such as Protestants, and strictly control foreign citizens, including Catholic priests, who conduct religious activity. There is no legal provision for conscientious objection to military service, and the religious rights of prisoners are frequently denied.

Government control

In addition to the top-ranking official, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, each of the country's six regions employs multiple religious affairs officials, as does Minsk city. Officials from local Ideology Departments and the Belarusian secret police (which proudly retains the Soviet-era designation of KGB) are also involved in religious controls. Central to the web of restrictions is the 2002 religion law, which includes compulsory state registration of all religious communities and geographical limits on religious activity. Religious meetings in private homes must not be regular or large. Houses of worship and any public exercise of religion must have state permission, which is rarely granted for disfavored groups, particularly Protestants. Orthodox and Catholic communities are less affected, partly due to the state's more positive attitude towards them, but also because they are more likely to occupy historic churches. Unregistered religious activity is usually treated as an administrative offense punished by a fine. Since registration is compulsory, the religion law makes no provision for those who do not wish to register, such as the Council of Churches Baptists.

A religious group found to have violated the law must correct the alleged violation within six months and not repeat it for one year, or face closure. There are no legal provisions to challenge such warnings. In April 2007, the Constitutional Court noted the Religion Law's failure to give

religious groups the legal right to challenge warnings. After that decision, Jehovah's Witnesses have often tried, but failed, to establish the legal right to challenge rulings.

Action against religious leader

Roman Catholic priest Father Vladislav Lazar stands accused of treason for allegedly giving money to a person accused of spying, which he denies, but no details were provided on the charges, nor any evidence, according to Forum 18 News Service. After six months of incommunicado detention in Minsk's KGB detention center, Father Lazar was transferred to house arrest in December 2013, but the criminal investigation continues. The KGB interrogated his bishop, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of the Minsk-Mogilev diocese, as a witness in the case. The charges carry a punishment of 7 to 15 years' imprisonment. It is not known why the Belarusian authorities arrested and charged the priest. In July 2013, eight weeks after Father Lazar's arrest, President Aleksandr Lukashenko remarked on the arrest of a KGB secret police officer and claimed that this officer had passed on information through the Catholic Church. In a courageous step, Father Lazar's parishioners in Borisov have written a petition to the Belarusian authorities calling for his release.

Recommendations

As the United States has almost no diplomatic relations with Belarus, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should publicly raise Belarusian religious freedom violations at appropriate international fora, such as the OSCE and the UN, including the need to reform the religion law and calling for the dropping of all criminal charges against Catholic Father Lazar.