

Putin Escalates War Against Churches

Vladimir Putin has escalated and broadened his war against the churches, according to sources inside areas occupied by Russian forces. Speaking on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, individuals in Southern Ukraine and the Kyiv region have reported incidents to individuals working with Charisma News.

Each incident has been verified by at least three sources. The second story has been confirmed by a reliable source. Fact-checking of reported incidents is ongoing.

In the city of Mariupol, the target of continual Russian bombardment for several weeks, Russian troops hunt for pastors who did not leave the city.

The Russian search netted Alexander Glushko, pastor of Light of the World Evangelical Church in Mariupol, who was arrested following an illegal search of his home. After discovering Glushko's diploma from an evangelical theological seminary, authorities arrested the pastor and took him away.

Glushko has been missing for more than a week. The Russians deny the family information about his whereabouts. It is believed that his captors moved him to a detention center near Donetsk, 65 miles from Mariupol and on the territory of one of the breakaway provinces.

Light of the World Church is one of the oldest evangelical congregations in Ukraine, founded during Josef Stalin's Great Purge in 1937. Many church members were imprisoned and some died for their faith.

Russian depredations are not confined to southern Ukraine but occur in every region occupied by the Russians.

Russian troops attacked a drug rehabilitation center in Motizin, a village near Kyiv, on March 26, and kidnapped one of the ministers there, Oleg Bondarenko.

Around 12:00 p.m. Russian troops opened fire on the rehabilitation center with heavy machine guns while people were still inside. Some occupants jumped from second-floor windows to save themselves.

Bondarenko was bound and taken by Russian troops. Yriy Babinets, bishop of the church, has requested prayer for Bondarenko's safe return.

Churches, seminaries and ministry buildings have also been targeted by Russian tanks and artillery.

The Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary in Pushcha-Vodytsya, near Irpin, has been shelled, causing serious damage to the administration building and dining hall.

Mission Eurasia's ministry's headquarters building in Irpin has also been destroyed by Russian troops, reports Sergey Rakhuba, president of the organization. Mission Eurasia has trained thousands of young leaders in every country in Eurasia, published and distributed millions of copies of Scripture, Rakhuba adds.

Mission Eurasia (formerly called Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries) was founded in 1991 just after the collapse of the Soviet Union by Rev. Peter and Anita Deyneka to react quickly and decisively to new opportunities for evangelism and church-planting in the former Soviet Union.

The widespread seizure of pastors and church leaders continues the pattern of targeting religious leaders that was common throughout the Soviet era and has been standard operating procedure since 2014 when Russian soldiers and their surrogates invaded Eastern Ukraine.

Prominent leaders in both Ukraine and Russia fear that once Putin completes his “special” operations in Ukraine, they will not be able to worship in public again, according to several individuals with a long acquaintance with religious leaders in both countries.

Despite the threat of arrest, imprisonment and death, Ukrainian church leaders are not intimidated by the Russians. “Bishops and pastors do not express fear for their own safety,” says one source close to a number of key leaders. “They request prayer that the doors to freely preach the gospel will remain open.”

“People are coming to church,” another leader observes. “A lot of people feel lost, need the peace of God and wisdom to know what to do.”

Their greatest desire is that believers around the world will stand with them in prayer. {eoa}

Gary Kellner is the founder and former executive director of the Institute of Christian Leadership, the first graduate school of leadership studies in the former Soviet Union. He served as the president of Save Ukraine Now, an interdenominational organization supporting the Ukrainian people through advocacy and by providing humanitarian aid during the Russian incursion in 2014.

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