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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Vins: Pressure From West
Resulted in His Release

By Carol Franklin and Stan Hastey

WASHINGTON (BP)--Georgi Vins told the Helsinki Commission that pressure by government officials and Christians in the western world was essential to his release from Soviet prison in April.

In response to a question from Senator Robert Dole, R-Kan., about the effectiveness of the commission, the media, and others in the west who protest the treatment of Soviet dissidents, Vins said, "I am absolutely sure that without the help of God and the support of Christians around the world, many more USSR Christians would be in prison."

Vins further stated that Soviet Christians and citizens in general support President Carter's human rights emphasis and "welcome the concern of the American people."

In a dramatic announcement preceding Vins' testimony before the 15-member commission, Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., one of six U. S. senators on the panel, announced that the Soviet pastor's family will be released the week of June 10.

Vins is scheduled to address the closing session of the Southern Baptist Convention in Houston, June 14.

According to Olin Robison, president of Middlebury (Vt.) College with whom Vins is staying, the entire family, including Vins's mother and niece, have been given permission to leave the Soviet Union. They expect "to settle down the road from us," Robison told Baptist Press.

The Helsinki panel, whose official designation is Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, consists of six U. S. senators, six members of the House of Representatives, and three members of the Carter administration, and is charged with monitoring human rights conditions in all of the 35 nations which signed a comprehensive human rights document at Helsinki in 1975.

On the same day it heard Vins's testimony, the commission released the names of 10,000 other Soviet "evangelical Christians" who have made public their wish to emigrate from the Soviet Union.

Vins is one of five Soviet dissidents released on April 27 in exchange for two convicted Russian spies.

Vins is secretary of the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (Reform Baptists) which broke away from the officially sanctioned All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists in 1965. Vins harshly criticized the official group, which has registered with the Soviet government.

"The All-Union Council, that is, the leadership, is a body linked in the closest possible way with the state authorities, including the KGB," Vins said. "Its prescribed role is to act as a screen for religious freedom in the USSR."

Vins went on to say that representatives of the registered Baptists "travel widely throughout the whole world proclaiming the imaginary religious freedom in the USSR. They perform the same role inside the country when they receive foreign religious organizations and maintain correspondence with them."

He said that his group, which in contrast to the officially-recognized All-Union Council has been forced largely underground, holds to such "fundamental principles" as the authority of Scripture "in all matters and all questions concerning faith and life;" the "absolute freedom of conscience;" the "spiritual regeneration" of church members; baptism by faith; the independence of the local congregation; the priesthood of all believers; and separation of church and state.

Vins called for continued support from the west for religious freedom in the Soviet Union. Detailing persecution of believers, he said there are about 40 Baptists now in prison for their beliefs.

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Vins also repeatedly called for the release "of all prisoners of conscience in the USSR," including not only Baptists, but members of the Russian Orthodox Church, Pentecostals, Adventists, Catholics, and Jews.

He also described the extensive harassment of "the Christian" printing press which issues Bibles and other religious literature. Vins said that about 10 million pieces of religious literature had been confiscated by the Soviet authorities in the years between 1929 and 1973. He urged the government to return all of that material to Christians.

Charging that registration of churches leads to direct intervention of the state in church affairs, including the appointment of pastors, Vins called for an end to "all kinds of interference by the KGB in the internal life of the Evangelical Christian and Baptist Church."

After describing many forms of repression of religious life, which include fines, breaking up of peaceful Christian meetings, attacks on Christian weddings, and harassment of Christian children, Vins urged that the Soviet government end all such activities. He noted that they are illegal under the Soviet constitution, which guarantees religious freedom to all citizens.

Vins told the commission that his release should not be viewed as a softening of Soviet policy toward dissidents. On the contrary, he said that repression is becoming "more sophisticated." "The situation is so desperate that people are willing to give up their Soviet citizenship and live anywhere in the world where they can practice their faith," Vins said.

Vins asserted that the KGB sets up church centers to spy on believers. He also said that the latest technology is being used to "bug" churches and believers' homes. In an ironic twist, he pointed out that this equipment is bought in the United States.

Vins described his two terms in prison for the commissioners. During his first term he was ordered to do "especially difficult manual labor. My health was ruined within a few months," Vins said. He said he developed a double hernia.

"The living conditions and diet were extremely poor," he continued. "We had no baths for months at a time so everyone was dirty and had insects."

His second imprisonment was in northern Yakutia, nearly to the Arctic Circle, Vins said. "The frosts reached -62 degrees Celsius," he said. He reported that he was constantly watched by authorities and surrounded by informers. "The authorities were worried I would convert the other prisoners. When I talked to a prisoner and then he prayed, he would be transferred to another prison."

Vins's visits from his family were infrequent during his imprisonment because he was "deliberately" imprisoned 6,000 kilometers from them. "When they did come we had one day together. The KGB recorded the meetings, including all the most intimate words we uttered," he said.

Vins said that his living conditions "improved radically" when the U.S. Congress began to give publicity to his case in 1976. He was given hospital care and his diet was improved.

The U.S. Senate and House of Representatives passed a concurrent resolution that year calling for Vins's release. Introduced by Southern Baptist John H. Buchanan, R-Ala., that resolution began to focus world-wide attention on the Russian Baptist pastor.

Vins told the commission that he was convicted because he maintained contacts with the Christian printing press, organized Sunday Schools for children, and made public the torture and death of a Soviet soldier in 1972.

"My actions were not criminal but purely religious in nature," Vins said. "Because we are successful and have many new believers, the authorities conduct these activities against us."

Vins expressed his dream for the future when he said, "I would like in the final analysis to return to my homeland and preach the gospel freely. That is my prayer."



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