

Americans Booted in Visa Snafu

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The head of the Russian Evangelical Church is calling for a reversal of the fines imposed on eight Americans doing charity work on tourist visas in Ivanovo.

Konstantin Bendas made the request in a statement to The Moscow Times on Thursday.

A spokeswoman for the Federal Migration Service in Ivanovo said the eight visitors were engaged in activities not allowed by the rules of the visas they used to come to Russia.

"The preacher and seven members of the congregation of Harmony Baptist Church in Pennsylvania came to the region on tourist visas but undertook humanitarian and charity work in orphanages and state boarding schools, where they gave teaching seminars, quizzes and religious readings," Vitalia Zagummenikova said, Interfax reported.

But Bendas insisted that the fined citizens could not be punished for just doing charity work and would only have broken the law if they had been preaching professionally.

"According to the documents that I have seen, the reason for the fine was based on their charity work," he said. "As such, the decision seems strange to say the least, and I believe that federal information services should react appropriately and withdraw their decision and the corresponding fine.

"If [their words in the orphanages] were not professional sermons, conferences or teachings, then they had the full right to give humanitarian help and also talk to anyone on the street or in places of residence about their beliefs."

The eight Pennsylvanians were fined 2,000 rubles (\$68) each. After being notified of the fine, they left the country, the migration service said, Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported.

This is the second high-profile visa breach in the past month. It follows French journalist Anne Nivat's expulsion from Russia after researching a book while in the country on a business visa.

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