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KAZAKHSTAN: "The fight against terrorism and religious groups without registration"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Two Baptist congregations - one state-registered and the other a branch of a state-registered congregation - and a Pentecostal congregation are among the latest victims of Kazakhstan's crackdown on religious freedom known to Forum 18 News Service. The raids and what Baptists describe as "crude" methods used to interrogate elderly church members were described to Forum 18 by police as "part of the fight against terrorism and religious groups without registration." Police also claimed - apparently falsely - that this is part of a CIS-wide initiative. Unregistered Baptist communities and members of the Tabligh Jamaat Islamic movement also continue to be targeted by the authorities. Kazakh officials continue to encourage citizens to link non-state authorised religious activity with serious crime. Increasingly harsh legal moves against religious freedom and media reports of "illegal" religious communities have created, Forum 18 has been told, a climate of fear among many religious minorities.

Two Baptist congregations - one with state registration and the other a branch of a state-registered congregation - and a Pentecostal congregation in North Kazakhstan Region are among the latest victims of Kazakhstan's crackdown on religious freedom known to Forum 18 News Service. Apparently known as Operation Religious Extremism, the latest centrally-directed moves have been conducted by the regional police Department for Combating Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism. "This operation has been ordered from the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Astana," Madina Balgashukova, spokesperson for the North Kazakhstan regional police, told Forum 18 from Petropavlovsk on 26 February.

Police spokesperson Balgashukova claimed that "it is a CIS programme to counter extremism, but this is the first time it is being carried out in Kazakhstan." There are general CIS statements and agreements promising joint efforts to fight extremism and terrorism, but there are no similar CIS-wide actions against religious freedom known by Forum 18 in other CIS countries. Kazakh law professor Roman Podoprigora, who specialises in religious law, told Forum 18 on 27 February that he too had not noted any CIS-wide crackdown and doubted that this explanation covered Kazakh police actions.

As well as attempting to justify Kazakh police actions by claiming them to be a "a CIS programme," police spokesperson Balgashukova denied any knowledge of Baptist complaints about the "crude" methods used to interrogate often elderly church members. She did not explain why peaceful registered religious communities were the victims of what she described as "the fight against terrorism and religious groups without registration."

This crackdown follows in the wake of Kazakh government plans to even more severely restrict religious freedom with a new Religion Law. One draft of the Law seen by Forum 18 bans all unregistered religious activity, and bars registered religious communities with fewer than 50 members would be banned from publishing or importing religious literature, maintaining open places of worship or conducting charitable activity. Human rights activists and religious minorities have condemned the latest proposals. The KNB secret police are also planning separate restrictions on religious freedom via the Anti-terrorism Law (see F18News 21 February 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=916>).

Forum 18 has been unable to find out from the Interior Ministry in the capital Astana when the apparently nationwide operation is planned to take place in Kazakhstan's other regions. The telephones at the Ministry's press service went unanswered on 26 February and Forum 18 could find no other Interior Ministry official prepared to answer any questions about the operation.

Zhangildy Uraliev, head of the North Kazakhstan regional police Department for Combating Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions about the aims and scope of the operation in his region. "I can't see you and don't know who you are," he told Forum 18 from Petropavlovsk on 26 February. "Anyway, we don't give out information by telephone."

Police spokesperson Balgashukova insisted that the local police were merely carrying out orders issued from the centre. "They dictated the terms," she told Forum 18. "This is part of the fight against terrorism and religious groups without registration. We went to collect material." While insisting that the police have "nothing against" unregistered groups, she declined to say what the "material" collected would be used for or whether the operation in the region is now at an end.

Kazakh officials are openly willing to ignore the country's international human rights obligations in their crackdowns on unregistered religious communities (see F18News 2 June 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793>). Registration procedures are highly intrusive and appear to be designed with control not legal status as their goal (see F18News 9 June 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=797>). Fines for unregistered religious activity have continued to escalate (see F18News 30 January 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=904>).

Two of the congregations targeted are members of the Baptist Union. One local Baptist pastor who preferred not to be identified insisted that one - in the village of Nalobino - is registered, while the other - in the village of Znamenskoe - is an officially recognised branch of a registered congregation. The pastor explained that the Znamenskoe congregation has fewer than ten members, but one congregation member was summoned and held for interrogation at the local administration for five hours. "Then they summoned the other church members, who were forced to write and sign statements about who leads the church and who preaches," he told Forum 18. "The older people were very frightened." The pastor expressed surprise that the police did not wait for the pastor of the registered congregation of which it is a branch to arrive.

Events were similar in Nalobino, the pastor told Forum 18. "Police prevented a service taking place and spoke very crudely to the believers. Officers even spoke to the older church members like that - they just didn't understand what was happening."

The pastor says that the Baptists do not know what the police will now do with the statements they have collected. "We had such problems in earlier years, but these were all resolved quickly. We don't understand why the police were so crude this time." He insisted that the Baptists are law-abiding. "We don't oppose registration and try to do everything to keep within the law."

Despite the Baptists' statement that the Nalobino congregation has legal status, the regional police have insisted on claiming that it "has no charter and is officially banned".

Forum 18 was unable to reach members of the Grace Pentecostal congregation in the village of Yakor which the police say was also "uncovered" during the operation.

Legal status can be difficult to get for religious communities the government does not like in some parts of Kazakhstan. Non-Muslim religious communities led by ethnic Kazakhs have particular and growing difficulties, Forum 18 has been told. New laws punishing unregistered religious activity and media reports about "illegal" religious communities have created what has been described to Forum 18 as a climate of fear among many religious minorities, who have become more afraid to discuss their problems.

As the crackdown on unregistered religious activity continues across Kazakhstan, congregations of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register, are again suffering police raids and fines. These Baptists argue that the authorities cannot insist that they register before they can function, calling on religious freedom rights set out in Kazakhstan's Constitution and international human rights documents the country has signed. Officials of the Presidential Administration have claimed that President Nursultan Nazarbayev is "too busy" to see Baptist leaders seeking to discuss state harassment of their congregations (see F18News 30 January 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=904>).

On 16 January, Baptist preacher Andrei Grigoryev was fined 43,680 Tenge (2,170 Norwegian Kroner, 270 Euros or 350 US Dollars) by a court in Aktobe [Aqtöbe] in north-western Kazakhstan under Article 362 part 1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "wilful refusal" to carry out legal court orders. The court ruled that he had defied an earlier court ruling to halt the religious activity of his congregation. Grigoryev had already been fined on 24 April 2006 and 4 October 2006, but he refused to pay these fines, regarding them as unjust. Court executors then put a restraining order on his home and on his VW car. Average monthly salaries have been estimated to be roughly equivalent to 31,535 Tenge (1,590 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros, or 260 US Dollars).

Court proceedings in Kazakhstan do not offer the guaranteed right to a fair trial which the country's human rights obligations oblige its courts to offer. An Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) 23 February 2007 report on trial monitoring in Kazakhstan between 2005 and 2006 found that court proceedings needed to offer "the right of the public to attend court, equality between the parties and the presumption of innocence." Mark Guthrie of the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) commented that "the right to a fair trial plays a crucial role in the maintenance of order, the rule of law and confidence in State authorities" (see <<http://www.osce.org/item/23396.html>>).

Also, the OSCE's Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief is "deeply concerned" by ongoing Kazakh state actions targeting the Hare Krishna community, which raise "serious issues regarding the enjoyment of the freedom of religion and belief" in Kazakhstan (see F18News 31 January 2007

<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=905>).

On 11 February, police and local authority officials raided the Aktobe Baptist church's Sunday morning service, accompanied by print and television journalists, who filmed the service against the wishes of congregation members. The police drew up an official report that the service had taken place. Using the media to incite intolerance against religious minorities, such as Baptists and Hare

Krishna devotees, is a normal tactic for the authorities (see F18News 2 June 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793>).

On 21 February, Andrei Grigoryev was summoned with four other church members for interrogation at the Public Prosecutor's Office, church members told Forum 18 on 24 February. All were told that paperwork to initiate prosecution under the Code of Administrative Offences was already being prepared, based on their leadership and participation in a religious organisation banned by the court on 24 April 2006. The paperwork has now been sent to the Aktobe Specialised Administrative Court.

Church members call on supporters to pray for those facing criminal and administrative proceedings and to appeal for the cancellation of the April 2006 ban on the church's activity, an end to the administrative proceedings, a change in the law to end the requirement for religious communities to register, the cancellation of all the fines levied on Grigoryev and the release of his home and car. Baptists in Aktobe Region have long been a target of official hostility (see eg. F18News 2 June 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793>).

Fellow-Baptist Dmitry Isaev was fined on 19 February in his home town of Uralsk in West Kazakhstan Region, Baptist sources told Forum 18 the following day. Police Captain Talgat Usenbaev came to the 20-year-old Isaev's home and issued him with a summons to attend the Administrative Court. Once there, Judge G. Minius fined him 51,150 Tenge (2,520 Norwegian Kroner, 310 Euros or 410 US Dollars) for his religious activity. "The church of Uralsk asks for prayers for brother Dmitry, as well as for other brothers sentenced earlier," local Baptists told Forum 18. Baptists in this region have also been the targets of past official hostility (see F18News 1 March 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=735>).

Meanwhile, the authorities are continuing to prevent preachers from the Tabligh Jamaat Islamic movement from preaching in mosques (see F18News 14 November 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=868>). On 20 February the Aktobe regional police told the Interfax-Kazakhstan news agency that they had prevented five preachers from beginning a nine-day sermon cycle at the central mosque. Officers had entered the mosque and taken the five away "to confirm their identity". The five were from Zhambyl and Southern Kazakhstan Regions, and had also intended to preach in West Kazakhstan Region also, the police said. Police have handed the case materials to the Public Prosecutor's Office.

Christian foreign missionaries have also been fined and deported for their religious activity (see eg. F18News 15 November 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=871>). Foreigners who are not missionaries, but are just taking part in the normal activity of Kazakh churches they belong to, have also been fined and deported, following concealed surveillance of worship services by the authorities (see F18News 12 December 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=886>).

Kazakhstan continues to encourage citizens to link peaceful religious activity with serious crime. In a sign of the increasing link officials are making between religious activity the Kazakh government has not authorised and criminality, moves against the Baptists and the Tabligh Jamaat members were reported at a 22 January review of police activity in Aktobe region in 2006 attended by deputy interior minister Kozhamurat Uskimbayev. "The activity of 23 missionaries of the Tabligh Jamaat movement has been halted, while the activity of the illegal Evangelical Christian/Baptist religious association and others has been unmasked and forbidden in the courts," Kazinform news agency reported. Other crimes discussed at the meeting in the same breath as these religious "crimes" were drug trafficking, thefts and physical assaults. (END)

For a personal commentary on how attacking religious freedom damages national security in Kazakhstan, see F18News <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=564>

For more background, see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701>

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806> and a survey of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815>.

A printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>>

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:

f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY