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KAZAKHSTAN: Conference cancelled after pastor's visa denied

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

The New Generation Pentecostal church in Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty cancelled a conference due to have begun on 12 June after the church's Latvian-based chief pastor was denied a Kazakh visa. The Kazakh consulate in Latvia told Pastor Aleksei Ledyayev, who was born in Kazakhstan, that a visit to his homeland was "not desirable" but refused to give a reason. "We're asking the authorities for an explanation - and we'll lodge a fresh application for Pastor Aleksei to get a visa," Viktor Ovsyannikov, pastor of the Almaty church, told Forum 18 News Service. Ledyayev was blacklisted by Russia in 2002 and is also barred from Belarus. Others barred from Russia on religious grounds remain barred in Kazakhstan, though Lutheran bishop Siegfried Springer, deported from Russia in April, told Forum 18 he has received a visa for Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's denial of a visa to Aleksei Ledyayev, chief pastor of the New Generation Pentecostal church, has led the church to cancel a conference due to have begun in the city of Almaty on 12 June. Ledyayev - a permanent resident of Latvia - told Forum 18 News Service from the Latvian capital Riga on 6 June that in denying the visa in April, the Kazakh consulate told him he was on a blacklist and that his presence in Kazakhstan was "not desirable". It refused to give any reason for the denial, but Ledyayev maintains he was added to the blacklist after being "indefinitely" barred from Russia in 2002. He is also barred from Belarus.

Viktor Ovsyannikov, pastor of the Almaty New Generation congregation which had invited Ledyayev, reports that the authorities are still refusing to say why the visa was refused, though he attributes the refusal to the collective security agreement between Kazakhstan, Russia and other CIS states. "We're asking the authorities for an explanation - and we'll lodge a fresh application for Pastor Aleksei to get a visa," Ovsyannikov told Forum 18 from the city on 8 June.

Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone at the Kazakh foreign ministry in the capital Astana or the Kazakh consulate in Riga to find out why Ledyayev's visa was refused and whether, if a new application is lodged, it will be considered.

Ledyayev was due to have been the featured speaker at the conference, which was to have included church members from at least six of the 14 countries where the New Generation Church has congregations. "Our church in Almaty had booked one of the biggest halls in the city and had sent out invitations to Pastor Aleksei and many church representatives," associate pastor Vadim Privedenyuk told Forum 18 on 6 June from Riga. "Only Pastor Aleksei was denied a visa."

Ovsyannikov says no date has been set for a rescheduled conference. "The conference won't take place without Pastor Aleksei. It would be a great blessing for the church and the city."

Ledyayev told Forum 18 that the ban on entry to Kazakhstan is a double-denial of his human rights, because he was born in the country and lived there for 25 years before moving to Latvia. "My parents are buried in Kazakhstan and I can't now visit their grave." He said he was last in Kazakhstan in the late 1990s and this is the first time since then he has applied for readmission.

Other religious figures banned by Russia remained barred from Kazakhstan. Swedish Pentecostal preacher Carl-Gustaf Severin from the Word of Life Church was barred from Kazakhstan several years ago after being barred by the Russian authorities. Japanese Buddhist monk and teacher Junsei Teresawa, who was barred by Russia in 2000 but whose entry ban to Ukraine was overturned in May (see F18News 30 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=573), is also still barred from Kazakhstan. He told Forum 18 he was most recently denied entry to Kazakhstan in March 2004.

Mystery surrounds the reported expulsion of two Spanish Christian missionaries. Berik Asylov, deputy prosecutor in South Kazakhstan region, told Radio Free Europe from Chimkent on 24 May that local law enforcement agencies had recently detained and expelled Christian and Muslim missionaries. "Two Spaniards holding papers from South Kazakhstan's Episcopate worked as missionaries in [the region], and we detained them," Asylov told the radio station. "We have also arrested someone from the centre for Koran research named Dal-Arkam. I can't say for how long they have been operating but not for long, maybe one or two months."

Reached by Forum 18 on 8 June, Berik Kaipov, spokesperson for the South Kazakhstan prosecutor's office, said Asylov refused to give any more information about the expelled Spaniards, including their names and religious affiliation, or about the detained

Muslim without an "official written application".

However, a diplomat of the Spanish embassy in Almaty told Forum 18 on 8 June that after receiving reports of the alleged expulsion it had contacted the two Spanish Catholic priests based in Chimkent. "They were very surprised to hear the reports - they have had no special feeling of being harassed," the diplomat reported. "As far as the embassy knows, there are no Spanish Protestant missionaries in the region, so we doubt the reliability of this report."

The Catholic Church, which depends on foreign citizens for many of its priests and nuns, confirmed that it has not experienced visa problems. "Our foreign priests and nuns have received visas all the time with no problems," a representative of the Almaty diocese told Forum 18 from the city on 7 June. "This is in accordance with Article 2 of the 1998 agreement between the Holy See and the Kazakh government." One Catholic exception was Slovak priest Fr Stanislav Krajnak, who was refused a visa for a brief visit to Kazakhstan in 2002 shortly before he was refused permission to remain in Russia.

In the South Kazakhstan region a foreign missionary working with the South Korean-led Synbakyn Protestant church had his visa cut short last December and had to leave Kazakhstan, though he has since been allowed to return. The local leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, a Pakistani national, was warned when he renewed his visa late last year that this was the last time he would gain a visa renewal (see F18News 10 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=486).

However, in one recent case Lutheran bishop Siegfried Springer has been given a visa to Kazakhstan and is due to visit from 12 to 20 June, he told Forum 18 from Germany on 6 June. Bishop Springer's valid Russian visa was cancelled by the Russian borderguards in Moscow in April, though he was allowed a brief return to his diocese in Russia in May (see F18News 4 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=555).

For a personal commentary on current legal moves to seriously restrict religious freedom in Kazakhstan under the guise of "national security", 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=249

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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