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KAZAKHSTAN: "The secret police's persecution by proxy"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Members of the Grace Presbyterian Church in the north-eastern town of Karaganda – who have already faced the police, the KNB secret police, the Prosecutor's Office and the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service – now face intrusive questioning from the Tax Police. Among the questions are why they go to the church and not to the mosque. Members of the Hare Krishna commune near Almaty in the south equally face relentless pressure from a succession of different government agencies in a bid to crush their activity. Migration Police raided the commune on 20 September checking the documents of all those present at an important religious festival. "This is the KNB secret police's persecution by proxy," one observer familiar with both cases, who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18 News Service. But Amanbek Mukhashev of the government's Religious Affairs Committee claimed to an OSCE conference in Warsaw on 26 September that "freedom of belief and freedom to express religious beliefs have become one of the leitmotifs in the work of Kazakhstan's state and local organs of power".

Members of the embattled Grace Presbyterian Church in the north-eastern town of Karaganda [Qaraghandy] now face interrogation by the tax police as the authorities continue their pressure on the church, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service from the town. Since a massive raid on 24 August, the church has faced treason investigations from the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police, as well as investigations from the Prosecutor's Office, the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service and now the Tax Police. Similarly the Hare Krishna commune near the commercial capital Almaty – which has already been partially bulldozed and confiscated – faced a raid by the Migration Police on 20 September. "This is the secret police's persecution by proxy," one observer familiar with both cases, who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18.

In a further intimidatory move, Protestants in Karaganda have told Forum 18 that local officials – whom they declined to identify for fear of further intimidation from them – have warned other Protestant leaders that they will face the same problems as the Grace Church if they are as active.

The relentless pressure on the Grace Church and the Hare Krishna commune – as well as other religious communities that the government does not like – comes at an embarrassing time for the Kazakh authorities, which had sent a large delegation to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Human Dimension Implementation Meeting conference in Warsaw.

"Today we can declare with complete assurance that in Kazakhstan all the necessary conditions have been created for the full freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief," the deputy head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, Amanbek Mukhashev, claimed to the conference on 26 September. "Today freedom of belief and freedom to express religious beliefs have become one of the leitmotifs in the work of Kazakhstan's state and local organs of power."

Mukhashev's boss, Yeraly Tugzhanov, refused to talk to Forum 18 on 27 September about the latest harassment of religious communities. As soon as Forum 18 had explained who was calling he put the phone down.

Sergei Pugachev, who is responsible for religious affairs at the Internal Policy Department of Karaganda Regional Akimat (administration), said he was unable to say why the Grace Church has been subjected to a string of extensive and intrusive investigations from such a wide range of state agencies. "The investigations are not by us but by others," he told Forum 18 from Karaganda on 27 September. "I don't know why they're taking place. The KNB is dealing with it."

The Karaganda KNB secret police refused to comment. "This is an open case, but I cannot give you any information by telephone," an officer who did not give his name told Forum 18 on 27 September. "We can only give this information to local journalists." He refused to explain why information which he claimed was not secret could be given to local journalists but not to the international media.

The church's problems began on 24 August, when the KNB secret police staged simultaneous raids on the churches in Karaganda and in the eastern town of Oskemen (Ust-Kamenogorsk), as well as on church-owned private homes in Karaganda. The raid on the Karaganda church itself – which was led by KNB officers from the capital Astana - lasted 15 hours. The KNB have repeatedly refused to explain to Forum 18 why the raids were staged and why the church's leaders and ordinary members are being subjected to such close investigation (see F18News 12 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1016).

Aleksandr Klyushev of the Association of Religious Communities of Kazakhstan, a mainly Protestant group, has been following developments closely. "The tax police interrogating dozens of church members, with questions about why they go to the church and not to the mosque," he told Forum 18 on 27 September. "These questions are humiliating and totally unacceptable. They are going way outside their powers."

Klyushev said many of those facing the closest scrutiny are those who have donated money to the church. The Tax Police had asked one church member about the purchase of a private flat 40 years ago, when Kazakhstan was under Soviet rule.

Aynur Makhaeva, spokesperson for the Karaganda regional Tax Police, told Forum 18 on 27 September that "materials" about the church had been passed on to the Tax Police by the Prosecutor's Office. She said she did not have the latest information, but as of several days earlier she was told investigations of church members had not yet begun. Asked why the Tax Police believes the church and its members need to be investigated she responded: "We don't have to report to the public."

In mid-September, reports started appearing in the local media – including Kazakhstan Today on 17 September – with information from the Prosecutor's Office that "psychotropic substances" had been found at the church and that church members were being investigated for misappropriating other church members' property.

Klyushev complained of what he regarded as deliberate leaks. "This was widely reported in the local press – but it was disinformation," he told Forum 18. "It was clear slander." He said the accusations related to a different and unrelated organisation.

Klyushev also questioned the timing of the investigation of the Grace Church's building by the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service. "This service is there to look for cockroaches," he pointed out.

Klyushev reported that the accusations against four leading church members of state treason – an extremely serious offence under Kazakh law – appear to have gone away. "These were being investigated in late August and early September, but no-one has heard anything of them recently," he noted with relief.

Meanwhile, members of the embattled Hare Krishna commune in the Karasai District near Almaty believe the 20 September raid by the Migration Police is just the latest move in the authorities' long-running campaign to destroy it. Hare Krishna spokesperson Maksim Varfolomeyev told Forum 18 from Almaty on 21 September that the raid was conducted by three Migration Police officers, accompanied by a policeman with a camera and Ryskul Zhunisbayeva and another official from the Karasai District Akimat. "The policeman with the camera filmed every interview the Migration Police took with our devotees."

Forum 18 reached Zhunisbayeva on 27 September, but she immediately put the phone down. Her boss, Gulnara Sultanova, the chief of the Internal Affairs Department, told Forum 18 immediately afterwards that she had no information on her subordinate's role in the 20 September raid. Asked why the commune is facing relentless pressure she responded: "Who's persecuting them? I won't comment to you."

Varfolomeyev complained that the raid – which lasted an hour and a half – took place while the community was celebrating one of their most important religious festivals of the year with many guests. He said they checked the identity documents of devotees present on the commune's farm and even on the bus leaving in the evening to take visitors back to Almaty.

He reported that one devotee, Russian citizen Mariana Kiselyova, was threatened with imprisonment as she did not have her internal passport with her showing where she is registered to live. "She had given her internal passport to a tourist firm to organise her residence registration and had not yet been able to collect it," he told Forum 18. "The Migration Police's demands were illegal." They then confiscated her international passport, reportedly signing the confiscation record with a signature of a fictitious devotee.

In their long-running campaign to close down the Hare Krishna commune, the authorities have already bulldozed 26 homes owned by devotees, with the remaining ten or so under threat. An adjoining farm has also been seized, with fears that the farmhouse on the land – in which the commune's temple is located – will also be seized. Officials had warned commune members that moves would be stepped up after Kazakhstan's 18 August parliamentary elections (see F18News 28 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1011).

The Kazakh authorities have increased controls on religious communities in recent years, especially by banning unregistered religious activity and increasing punishments for it. Among recent victims have been Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to seek state registration, and Jehovah's Witnesses, who have on occasion been among religious communities refused registration arbitrarily (see F18News 23 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=999).

A number of religious communities have told Forum 18 of their fears that further restrictions will soon be enacted when the long-promised amendments to the already-restrictive Religion Law are brought before the new parliament in Astana. "Since the election parliament is entirely filled with government deputies – there's not even one from the opposition," one observer told Forum 18 on 25 September. "Rumours have been rife that the new Law will be suddenly presented to parliament and adopted before anyone

has the chance to take any action" (see F18News 21 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=916).

Despite official claims that Kazakhstan's policy is to promote religious tolerance, the central government, individual officials and teachers officially promote intolerance against religious minorities, a campaign fuelled by hostile media coverage (see F18News 3 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=939). (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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