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KAZAKHSTAN: New wave of raids on Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Amid tightening state control on religious activity, Baptists who refuse to apply for state registration and Jehovah's Witnesses are facing increased state hostility, Forum 18 News Service has found. After about 200 ethnic Kazakh Jehovah's Witnesses gathered for a meeting, a varied group of officials, including the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service, arrived and closed the meeting hall for two days. They claimed that this was because of a bomb allegedly planted by an unnamed group or person. "We suspect the authorities are worried above all about ethnic Kazakhs becoming Jehovah's Witnesses," Forum 18 was told. "Events we hold in Russian do not arouse such hostility." As a series of raids take place on unregistered Baptist congregations, the state-controlled media is being used to promote intolerance of peaceful religious groups, one article describing the Baptists as "God-fearing lawbreakers" and their meetings for worship as "illegal meetings."

Amid tightening state control on religious activity, Baptist congregations that refuse to register with the government and Jehovah's Witnesses are bearing the brunt of offensive state measures, Forum 18 News Service has found. Police halted a 9 February Kazakh-language Jehovah's Witness congress in the northern town of Aktobe [Aqtobe], claiming a bomb scare, while a Baptist pastor in the same town is facing administrative charges to punish him for leading his congregation. On 10 February officials raided a Baptist service in the eastern town of Ridder (near Oskemen). "Reports are coming in more and more frequently of persecution of our believers across Kazakhstan," Baptists told Forum 18 on 20 February.

The renewed raids come after high-profile criticism of missionary activity in recent months from President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Justice Minister Zagipa Baliyeva and an increase in intrusive check-ups on the activity of religious communities of many faiths by a variety of state agencies (see F18News 15 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1089).

In recent months, fines on Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse on principle to state-register their congregations – have become more frequent. Baptists refuse to pay fines imposed for unregistered religious worship, and the authorities have also stepped up their confiscation of personal property to pay these fines.

Reached by Forum 18 on 21 February, officials of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Astana refused to explain the surge in the number of raids on Baptist and Jehovah's Witness meetings. Committee deputy head Amanbek Mukhashev put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 had put the question, while other officials would not comment.

Professor Roman Podoprigora of the Caspian Public University in Almaty – a specialist on religion and law - criticised the new wave of harassment of religious communities which meet without state registration. "Unfortunately this is a very old situation and stems from the same decisions by state officials," he told Forum 18 from Almaty on 21 February. Along with other respected international human rights lawyers, such as Professor Malcolm Evans (see <http://www.osce.org/odihr/57471>), he says no-one should face punishment for meeting for worship without state registration.

Along with the raids, the state-controlled media is being used to promote intolerance of peaceful religious groups. On 20 February an article in the newspaper Liter attacked the Council of Churches Baptists for failing to register. The journalist, Askar Jaldinov, describing official warnings given since the beginning of 2008 by the local Prosecutor's Office to an unregistered Baptist church in Almaty's Turksib District for continuing to hold what he described as "illegal meetings." Describing the church as "God-fearing lawbreakers," the journalist stated that public prosecution officials "saw how more than a hundred people gather together, hold services and sing psalms. And this is all that the controlling bodies are able to establish. As for the rest of their activities, nothing is known for certain – the Baptists refuse to register with the Justice agencies, even despite a decision of the court."

Professor Podoprigora expressed his concern at this article, describing the journalist's explanation of the legal position of unregistered religious communities as "uneducated".

Despite Jaldinov's lack of knowledge of international human rights standards on religious freedom, he declared: "It has to be noted that Kazakh laws regulating the legal relationship in such a delicate sphere as the religious sentiments of individuals are among the

most liberal in the world. At the same time, the unusual situation which the officials of the supervisory body have encountered definitely demands a resolution."

Jaldinov also wrote a hostile article in January about the Grace Presbyterian Church, which has faced repeated raids and threats of serious criminal charges against its leaders (see F18News 30 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1078).

The authorities have also used an apparently false bomb scare to obstruct freedom of thought, conscience and belief amongst ethnic Kazakhs. About 200 ethnic Kazakhs had gathered for the congress in the Jehovah's Witnesses' own building in Aktobe on 9 February, which was due to last the whole day. "The police, the Fire Service, the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service and the Ambulance Service turned up together just as the congress was due to start," Fyodor Zhitnikov of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 21 February. "They said there was a bomb scare and halted the meeting. Even though they checked the building with dogs and found nothing, they sealed the building and said no-one could enter for two days, thus putting an end to the congress."

Zhitnikov said the only suspicious thing found was a parcel in one of the bins wrapped up in cellophane. He said local Jehovah's Witnesses had told him a suspicious man had been present the day before when the rubbish had been collected and they suspect that he placed the object in the bins then.

State-controlled TV coverage of the alleged bomb incident, broadcast in both Aktobe and the capital Astana, included what the Jehovah's Witnesses describe as "slanders" against them.

Zhitnikov believes this was a targeted measure to prevent the congress from taking place. "We suspect the authorities are worried above all about ethnic Kazakhs becoming Jehovah's Witnesses," he told Forum 18. "Events we hold in Russian do not arouse such hostility."

Two days later, 11 February, Pastor Vasili Kliver of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Aktobe was summoned by the local police officer to the Prosecutor's Office, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 20 February. There the prosecutor's assistant Daniyar Sisengaliev informed Kliver that a case had been prepared against him for participating in the activity of a "banned religious organisation" and handed to the town's Specialised Administrative Court. He was accused of violating Article 374-1, Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "participation in the activity of a banned religious organisation".

Sisengaliev specifically noted that the church had been banned by Aktobe town's Second Court in December 2006, when another pastor, Andrei Grigoryev had been fined (see F18News 11 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=954).

An official of the Specialised Administrative Court told Forum 18 from Aktobe on 21 February that the case against Kliver is still being prepared and no date has yet been set for a hearing.

An official from the Complaints Department of the Aktobe Regional Prosecutor's Office – who would not give her name - admitted that several complaints about the prosecution of Pastor Kliver had arrived, but she defended the prosecution. "Religious organisations must be registered – that's our law," she told Forum 18 on 21 February. "As a law-abiding citizen he should obey this." She declined to say whether this represented a continuation of Soviet-era controls on all religious communities.

The moves against Pastor Kliver in Aktobe follow a series of raids by the police's Department for Combating Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism on the congregation's Sunday services since the beginning of 2008. "Ignoring requests from church members, they disturbed the services and carried out video-recordings," local Baptists complained to Forum 18. Kazakh authorities have in the past sought to link terrorism and serious crime with peaceful religious activity, not least through the state-run mass media (see F18News 28 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=921).

On 28 January church member Dana Abekenov was summoned to the police to be told he was engaged in the activity of an "illegal religious organisation". Two days later he was taken to the town Prosecutor's Office, where he was told an administrative case had been prepared against him. He was immediately tried by Judge Saule Abisheva and found guilty of violating Article 374-1, Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences. He was fined 58,400 Tenge (2,597 Norwegian Kroner, 329 Euros, or 488 US Dollars).

Meanwhile in the town of Ridder, police and Prosecutor's Office officials – accompanied by official witnesses – arrived at the Baptist church on 10 February just after the Sunday service ended. Local Baptists told Forum 18 on 20 February that they proceeded to film and photograph those present, ignoring protests from church members.

One Prosecutor's Office official, E. Kaliev, asked church members why they would not register, how they conducted services and what they read. He examined music books and journals. He then invited the church's leader, Andrei Bukhmiller, and the owner of the house where the church meets, M. Larionova, to the Prosecutor's Office the following day.

The Baptists report that the discussion at the Prosecutor's Office on 11 February was "good-natured". Kaliev asked again why the Baptists refuse to register, as well as what form their services take and how they differ from those of other denominations. He also asked why children are present at services.

However, on 12 February police and National Security Committee (KNB) secret police officers arrived at the church and demanded to be let in. After they threatened to break the lock, the Baptists present let them in. "Without presenting any documents they immediately began a search," the Baptists complained. Only one police officer and one KNB officer would show their identification cards – the rest refused.

When Larionova arrived she immediately demanded why they were searching her property without a warrant. She was told that authorisation would be issued within 24 hours. "You're not registered," officers told her. "We don't know what you're up to." Officers confiscated Christian literature, handwritten poetry notebooks, cassettes and discs, telling Larionova that if they were harmless they would be returned, but if they were harmful a criminal case would be lodged. The Baptists say the search – which began in mid-afternoon – lasted six and a half hours.

The KNB secret police in Eastern Kazakhstan Region, which includes the town of Ridder, refused to discuss the raid with Forum 18 on 21 February. No ordinary police officials were prepared to talk to Forum 18 either.

Defending the authorities' moves against the Baptist congregation was Olga Redkina, a specialist on work with religious organisations in the Internal Policy Department of the town's Akimat (administration). "It's all in accordance with the law," she told Forum 18 from Ridder on 21 February. "It is the only local religious organisation that's not registered." Asked why this means they cannot meet for worship in a privately-owned building, Redkina refused to answer any more questions.

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/astana/24153>).

Court executors are stepping up moves to confiscate property from Baptists to meet unpaid fines. On the evening of 10 December 2007, court executors arrived at the Astana home of Pastor Yaroslav Senyushkevich, as he told Forum 18 on 24 January. He was given a massive fine of 103,000 Tenge (4,580 Norwegian Kroner, 580 Euros or 860 US Dollars) in May 2006, to punish him for leading the local congregation, but refused to pay. Officials then threatened to dock the money from his wages (see F18News 11 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=954).

"The court executors told my wife it did not matter to them that I was not at home," Senyushkevich told Forum 18. After two and a half hours of looking round his house, while his wife and their five children were made to sit on the sofa, the court executors took a computer and an electronic keyboard.

Asked why he had not paid the fine, Senyushkevich noted that their Church does not want to register with the state on principle. "There is nothing criminal in what we do," he insisted to Forum 18. He said his appeal against the fine last year had failed and he saw no point in trying to appeal further.

However, in December 2007 a court executor in the town of Makinsk near Astana lifted a restraining order on a Volkswagen car imposed on local Baptist Adam Klyatt. This was imposed after he refused to pay a fine of 5,460 Tenge (243 Norwegian Kroner, 30 Euros or 45 US Dollars) handed down in June 2007 to punish him for leading his church. The fine remains in force, though. (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.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kazakhstan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=29>.

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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