

22 April 2013

KAZAKHSTAN: Four raids, heart attack, eight fines – amid presidential claims of religious freedom

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Within 48 hours of a claim by Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev that "religious freedom is fully secured", seven members of a small Pentecostal Church – four of them in their sixties – were given heavy fines for meeting for Easter Sunday worship. The leader, Aleksandr Balaev, was fined the equivalent of six months of his pension, he told Forum 18 News Service. Galina Gileva, who is 73, complained that during the raid police "brought me to such a position of stress that I suffered a heart attack". The raid on the Church in Zhaskent was one of four recent raids on religious worship. Lt-Colonel Nikolai Narkhov, head of Karabalyk Police in Kostanai Region, refused absolutely to answer Forum 18's questions as to why about 15 police officers and officials raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting, seizing religious literature.

Within two days of a claim by President Nursultan Nazarbaev that Kazakhstan fully respects religious freedom, seven mostly elderly Pentecostal church members were fined in East Kazakhstan Region for holding an Easter Sunday service in a private home. Officers initially accused them of storing drugs. One church member, Aleksandr Balaev – who is 66 – was fined the equivalent of six months of his pension, he complained to Forum 18 News Service. He said one 73-year-old church member suffered a heart attack four days after the raid, which he attributes to the stress of the raid and interrogation. She and another hospitalised church member could yet be fined.

In a heartfelt three-page hand-written letter seen by Forum 18, the 73-year-old, Galina Gileva, called on people to reach out to President Nazarbaev "so that he would hear us and resolve the problem with the authorities, i.e. the police and the courts". She recounted the pressure from the police "who have decided to use fear to separate us from God, something they can never achieve – they cannot ban me from my Christian faith".

Gileva added that police "brought me to such a position of stress that I suffered a heart attack". She had to seek medical attention for this and high blood pressure.

The fines on the Pentecostals came just over a week after a Baptist pastor elsewhere in East Kazakhstan Region was fined the same amount as Balaev for leading an unregistered religious service. Two Jehovah's Witnesses services have also been raided (see below).

Easter Sunday raid

On 31 March, Easter Sunday, nine members of a small congregation of New Life Pentecostal Church in the village of Zhaskent in East Kazakhstan Region were meeting for worship in Balaev's private flat when it was raided. Five police officers – among them anti-extremism police officer Captain Dauren Omargaliyev and local police officer Captain Timur Zhakupov – raided the service.

Accompanying them were the required two witnesses. Protestants familiar with the raid told Forum 18 that the two appeared to be drunk.

"Without presenting any warrant, the officers began to film and searched the flat," Protestants told Forum 18. "Senior local police officer Timur Zhakupov ordered church members to go to the police station to give statements, but they refused, demanding to know the reason for this. He told them they were conducting unregistered religious activity."

Six-hour interrogations

On 3 April, police summoned church members to the police station in Zhaskent, where they were held from 12 noon until 6 pm. "Before they were allowed to leave they were given the records of interrogation to sign where, as well as unregistered religious activity mention was made of storing and use of narcotics," Protestants complained to Forum 18. "Some of the elderly church members signed the record without reading it."

When one church member noticed the reference to narcotics, the rest refused to sign, according to several of the records seen by

Forum 18. Officers then threatened to imprison them for 24 hours.

Church members complained about the police conduct to East Kazakhstan Regional Prosecutor's Office. In one 14 April complaint to Borodulikha District Prosecutor Yerzhan Koshkin, seen by Forum 18, the mother of a 15-year-old girl who had been present at the Easter service complained that her daughter had been "forced to stand in front of the camera which led to a state of stress". Captain Zhakupov then came to their home and pressured the girl not to attend New Life Church's services again.

The telephone at the Borodulikha District Prosecutor's Office was not working on 22 April.

Seven fines

On 15 April cases against seven of the New Life Church members – four of whom are in their sixties - were handed to Borodulikha District Court, according to the verdicts seen by Forum 18.

On 18 April, Judge Bakhytzhann Sekerbekov found four church members guilty: Nina Afanasyeva, Natalya Mananskaya, Yekaterina Balaeva and Oleg Savitsky. On 19 April, Judge Zhannura Syzdykova found three more church members guilty: Vitaly Savitsky (Oleg's brother), Aleksei Murai and Aleksandr Balaev (Yekaterina's husband).

Balaev was regarded as the leader of the community. He was fined 100 Monthly Financial Indicators (MFIs) under Code of Administrative Offences Article 374-1, Part 1 ("Leadership of an unregistered or banned social or religious organisation"). The other six were each fined 50 MFIs under Code of Administrative Offences Article 374-1, Part 2 ("Participation in the activity of an unregistered or banned social or religious organisation").

Borodulikha Police told Forum 18 on 19 April that Captain Omargaliev was away on holiday, and no one else would be able to comment.

Zhaskent Police told Forum 18 the same day that Captain Zhakupov, Senior Lieutenant Ermuratov and Senior Lieutenant Zhakupbekov – all involved in the raid – were out.

The duty officer – who would not give his name – insisted to Forum 18 that the seven church members had been punished by the courts, not the police. "We didn't raid them, but they must register their community." Asked if the Soviet era - with its compulsory state registration and punishments for unregistered religious activity – had returned, he laughed and put the phone down.

Oskemen raid and fine

Five police officers raided a Baptist service in Oskemen, the capital of East Kazakhstan Region, on 20 March, local Baptists complained to Forum 18. The congregation – like all Council of Churches Baptist congregations – refuses to seek state registration, arguing that they do not need it and should not be forced to seek it.

"One of the police officers went through all of the rooms, photographed all the quotations from the Holy Scriptures hanging on the walls, all the religious literature and all those present," the Baptists noted. "When the meeting finished, they wouldn't let anyone leave the house and demanded that all of them – including the children – write statements."

As the community does not have state registration, officers drew up a record of an offence against the Pastor, Vitaly Krasilnikov under Code of Administrative Offences Article 374-1, Part 1.

On 9 April, Judge Edil Kuderbayev of Oskemen Specialised Administrative Court found him guilty and handed him the maximum fine of 100 MFIs, 173,100 Tenge, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18.

The verdict notes that Pastor Krasilnikov denied any wrongdoing in court. He insisted that the Constitution gives him the right to practice his faith and that he did not cause any harm to the state, society or individuals.

"A fellow church member accompanied Pastor Krasilnikov to the court, but they wouldn't let him into the hearing and wouldn't give a reason," the Baptists complained.

Pastor Krasilnikov has lodged an appeal to East Kazakhstan Regional Court.

Judge Kuderbayev refused to explain why he punished an individual simply for holding a religious meeting. "I can't give an interview – he has lodged an appeal," he insisted to Forum 18 from the court on 22 April. "Contact me after it has issued its ruling." He repeatedly refused to say if he was not embarrassed to be issuing such a punishment on an individual exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief and put the phone down.

Earlier Oskemen raid and fines

Following a police raid on a small meeting for worship of a Full Gospel congregation in Oskemen on Sunday 20 January, six church members were punished, according to the verdicts seen by Forum 18. Sergei Prosuntsov was brought to Oskemen's Specialised Administrative Court as leader of the community. He was accused of violating Administrative Code Article 374-1, Part 1. On 14 February, Judge Dauren Alimkhan fined him 100 MFIs. Prosuntsov told the court that he had led a religious community which met without registration in his home, but pointed out that the community had sought registration in vain for some years.

Also fined by the same judge at the same court on 14 February were fellow church members Gulmira Prosuntsova (Prosuntsov's wife), Aida Aytkaliyeva, husband and wife Aleksandr Krinitsky and Ayzhan Krinitskaya, and Vyacheslav Zhdanov. Each was fined 50 MFIs under Article 374-1, Part 2, according to the verdicts seen by Forum 18.

Kentau raid

Jehovah's Witnesses too have suffered police raids on their meetings. On 3 March, police in the town of Kentau in South Kazakhstan Region raided a meeting in a private home. They filmed the service and those who were in attendance. Anatoli Lunev, who was conducting the service, was forced to give a statement, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

On 18 February, Lunev had been summoned to the police station, where a similar statement was taken regarding the lawfulness of earlier Jehovah's Witness services in Kentau.

The duty officer at Kentau Police told Forum 18 on 22 April that both the police chief and his deputy were out and that only they could answer questions.

Karabalyk raid

On 6 April, a Jehovah's Witness service in a private home in the small town of Karabalyk in Kostanai Region was raided. "The actions of law-enforcement officials violated the rights of approximately 40 believers, members of a registered religious association who gathered for a religious service," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

About 15 officials from the town administration together with local police officers "rudely disrupted" the service in the home of Eduard Malykhin, "forcibly bursting in". They halted the service, filmed those present and demanded a statement from each. "None of the believers were allowed to leave the premises, even to use the toilet. Among those present were gravely ill persons and relatives of the homeowner, who were also forced to give statements."

Senior lieutenant Renat Khusainov from the district police station, the only officer who introduced himself, stated that the reason for bursting into the private home and disrupting the religious service was an anonymous call regarding a religious meeting being held by an "unknown sect". However, even after Malykhin presented copies of all founding documents of the religious association, which was re-registered and legally active in the entire Kostanai Region, aggressive actions by the officials continued.

Malykhin's home was searched and his personal library with religious literature was seized. Most of the people present were summoned to the district police station the same evening or the following day (Sunday) to give statements (Forum 18 has seen several of the summonses). At present, they are preparing complaints to Kostanai Regional Prosecutor's Office against what they regard as the "unlawful actions" of the law-enforcement officials.

"They violated the law"

Lt-Colonel Nikolai Narkhov, head of Karabalyk Police, refused absolutely to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 22 April as to why the religious meeting had been broken up. "Ask our press service," he kept repeating. Asked if he has responsibility for the actions of his officers, he repeated his response and put the phone down.

Lt-Colonel Yelena Kasharina, head of Kostanai Regional Police Press Service, denied to Forum 18 the same day that the raid had constituted a raid. "There is the Religion Law and there is the Code of Administrative Offences," she insisted to Forum 18. "They violated them." She refused to answer any further questions. She said Forum 18 could only receive an official response by lodging an official request to Kazakhstan's Interior Ministry in Astana.

Saule Nurbisaliyeva, head of the Internal Policy Department of Karabalyk District Akimat (administration), was not in the office on 22 April. The Department's Chief Specialist – who refused to give her name – denied absolutely that any raid had taken place. "It's not true – how could it be?" she told Forum 18. "I've never heard of this. Maybe there was a visit."

Asked why people cannot enjoy the right to freedom of assembly, speech and religion, the Chief Specialist told Forum 18: "How can you know what's happening here? You're just working to publish untrue information, to make up bad things about life in Kazakhstan."

Nazarbaev's claims

President Nazarbaev made his claims that Kazakhstan has religious freedom on 17 April at a joint briefing with the visiting Finnish President Sauli Niinistö. "We now maintain that Kazakhstan is an example to the world of equal rights and freedoms for all citizens, making up more than 130 ethnic groups," the presidential website quoted him as claiming. "We have here 46 religious denominations, and religious freedom is fully secured."

Two grandmothers in their late seventies were among seven Baptists fined in early April for participating in an unregistered religious meeting in a private home in the town of Ayagoz in East Kazakhstan Region (see F18News 10 April 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1822).

New Life Church's Easter Sunday service on 31 March in Stepnogorsk in Akmola Region was similarly raided. The raid followed an apparent state attempt to discredit or blackmail the Church. No administrative case was lodged against church members (see F18News 16 April 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1825).

However, officials have not yet moved to stop regular worship at the Din-Muhammad Mosque in Petropavl in North Kazakhstan Region. Mosque members are challenging the decision by the ARA to strip it of its legal status. The next hearing is due in the Regional Court on 30 April, community members told Forum 18.

All independent mosques across Kazakhstan are illegal, and those that struggle to continue risk punishment for meeting for worship without state registration (see F18News 1 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1809).

Prosecutors are also seeking to put on trial imprisoned atheist Aleksandr Kharlamov. He faces criminal charges – which he denies – of inciting religious hatred. He is being held in prison in Almaty and is due to undergo psychiatric examination (see F18News 18 April 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1826). (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=1352.

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/outline-map/?map=Kazakhstan>.

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