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KAZAKHSTAN: No hope for Hope orphanage?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A northern Kazakh local authority has closed a Baptist-run orphanage, although local people say it was one of the best in town – an opinion confirmed by staff of a state-run orphanage, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Baptists fear that the closure of the Hope orphanage, which cared for 30 children, will be followed by the forced closure of the Baptist-run Sion charitable fund, enabling the authority to seize the orphanage building. Businessmen have privately expressed interest in buying the building from the local authority. Questioned by Forum 18, officials dispute the opinions of local people and state orphanage staff, claiming that conditions in the Baptist orphanage were "atrocious," and also stating – falsely – that the Kazakh religion law bars orphanages from operating without state registration. The founder of the Baptist orphanage, Dmitri Yantsen, told Forum 18 that other local orphanages do not have state registration either, "but no-one is bothering them." He believes the real reason for the closure is the increasing severity of Kazakh state policy against religious believers.

At the end of November 2004, the local administration of a town in northern Kazakhstan closed the Baptist-run Hope orphanage, which housed more than 30 children. The town claims that the reason was that the orphanage was not registered with state justice agencies, the orphanage's founder, Dmitri Yantsen, told Forum 18 News Service on 4 January in Temirtau [Temirtäü], 35 kilometres north of the regional centre, Karaganda [Qaraghandy]. Officials also allege that conditions in the orphanage were "atrocious". However, local people dispute this, telling Forum 18 that the Hope orphanage was considered one of the best in the town, with higher standards than in state-run orphanages.

Baptists now fear that their Sion charitable fund, which ran the orphanage, is next in line for closure, as the regional procuracy has brought an administrative case against it, on the grounds that its statute describes it both as a charitable fund and a missionary organisation. "The Sion fund's statute was registered with the regional justice agency four years ago, but now for some reason state officials have resolved that missionary work does not fall under the remit of a charitable fund, and on these grounds it is trying to withdraw the Sion fund's registered status," Yantsen told Forum 18. "This will also allow them to take away the building which housed the Hope orphanage." Both the Hope orphanage and the Sion fund were set up by members of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register their churches with state authorities in CIS countries.

The orphanage has now virtually ceased operations. Of the more than 30 children who lived there before the closure order, just ten children are left. Ivan Pankrats, the orphanage director, formally became guardian to the ten before the town administration's decision. "The children who did not have adoption papers drawn up had to be sent to children's homes," Yantsen told Forum 18. "It was very hard - the children cried and didn't want to leave us."

Staff at a state orphanage in Temirtau, who preferred not to be named, supported the high regard of other local people for the Hope orphanage, declaring that conditions for children there were much better than at their place of work. "The Baptists feed the children meat every day, whereas in our orphanage sometimes there isn't even enough bread," the staff told Forum 18. "It's true that the Baptists encourage the children to pray and don't allow them to watch television, but even so it's better than having children living homeless huddled next to heating pipes, thieving and taking drugs." (The Baptists who ran the orphanage regarded watching television as a sin.)

Rosa Ashimova, a senior assistant to the chief public prosecutor for Karaganda region, strongly denied that the Hope orphanage had been closed because of its staff members' religious beliefs. "At the end of October we received an instruction from the republic's procuracy to check out all private orphanages and children's organisations," she told Forum 18 on 5 January in Karaganda. "When we came to check the Hope orphanage neither I nor the head of the commission nor its other members even knew that the orphanage was maintained by believers."

Despite the positive local testimony to Forum 18 about the Hope orphanage, Ashimova insisted that conditions there were bad. She claimed that when the procuracy team arrived, the first thing they saw was the "atrocious lack of hygiene". She claimed dust was everywhere, and in the bathroom piles of children's underwear and towels lay all over the floor. "We inspected the kitchen too and found that they were boiling up bones to make soup for the children's meal, without meat," she added. "Where the meat and the butter had gone that were in the meal plan sent to the official agencies, the orphanage staff were unable to explain."

She claimed that an 18-month-old child was sleeping in one of the bedrooms without any supervision, although under the law children of that age have to be supervised by adults. "We did not find one book other than the Bible at the orphanage and the staff said that they did not make the children read other books," Ashimova declared. "After all this we naturally checked the orphanage's documents more thoroughly and found that it was not even registered. We then appealed to the Temirtau town administration asking for the orphanage to be closed down."

When Forum 18 asked precisely which law banned children's orphanages from operating without registration, Ashimova referred to the religion law. However, this law says nothing about children's orphanages, nor does it ban religious associations from operating without registration. Ashimova also said that no-one was planning to cancel the Sion fund's registered status, at least for the time being, and no documents about this organisation had arrived from the justice ministry.

Yantsen says the orphanage had no problems with the authorities before October. Moreover, the regional and town administration encouraged their work in every way, and articles praising the orphanage frequently appeared in local newspapers. He said that when Temirtau's hakim (administration head) issued resolution No. 578 setting up the Hope orphanage on 6 June 1999, clause 2 of the document did indeed oblige the Baptists to "take all necessary steps concerning the state registration of the orphanage". "However, state officials told us that this simply related to obtaining permission from the fire safety inspectorate and the sanitary-epidemiological service," Yantsen declared. "We received the relevant documents. And now it turns out, four years later, that we apparently should have registered the orphanage with the regional justice agencies."

Yantsen maintained that other orphanages in Temirtau do not have registration with the justice agencies either, "but no-one is bothering them". "It can hardly be considered a coincidence that straight after the closure of the orphanage the procuracy is trying to remove the Sion fund's registered status. I am seriously concerned that there are plans to seize the building owned by the fund where the orphanage was situated." He said several businessmen have already told him privately they are planning to buy the building, once the regional administration has taken it from the Baptists.

Yantsen believes the real reason for the attacks on the Hope orphanage and the Sion fund is the increasing severity of state policy towards religious believers. "Baptists here in Kazakhstan have already written to President Nursultan Nazarbayev expressing their concern at the increased frequency of cases where believers are being persecuted," he told Forum 18. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>

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