

23 August 2005

KAZAKHSTAN: Attempts to suppress independent Muslims continue

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Murat Telibekov, head of the non-state controlled Union of Muslims of Kazakhstan (UMK), is facing a further court case, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, as part of what Telibekov believes are attempts to close down non-state controlled Muslim organisations. Telibekov has made accusations of corruption at the Nur-Mubarak Islamic Cultural University, which is controlled by the Egyptian and Kazakh governments, and the university has launched a legal case against both Telibekov and a Kazakh TV station which interviewed him about his claims. Shamsudin Kerim, vice-rector of the Nur Mubarak University, told Forum 18 that "the UMK is an illegal organisation. It's just a bogus outfit. The only organisation that can represent the interests of Muslims is the [state-controlled] Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan."

Murat Telibekov, head of the non-state controlled Union of Muslims in Kazakhstan (UMK), and the Kazakh TV station 31 Kanal, were summoned on 10 August to appear before the Almaly district court in Almaty, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The plaintiff, the Nur-Mubarak Islamic Cultural University, which is controlled by the Egyptian and Kazakh governments, has accused Telibekov and the TV station of "disregarding its honour and dignity" and called for them to be fined 3 million Tenge (about 144,800 Norwegian Kroner, 18,000 Euros, or 22,000 US Dollars).

The apparent cause of the summons is Telibekov's attacks on what he states is corruption at the university. "My articles about corruption at the university in the newspapers Novoye pokoleniye and Respublika, published in April 2005, are the grounds for the court case, as well as my television interview for 31 Kanal. But we have all the documents and evidence from students which demonstrate that there is corruption at the university. So we are prepared for legal action", Murat Telibekov told Forum 18 on 10 August.

Telibekov thinks though, that the real reason for the summons is a campaign by the state and the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (the Muftiate) to eradicate independent Muslim organisations. He emphasised to Forum 18 that the Nur-Mubarak University is part of the structure of the Muftiate.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 19 August, Shamsudin Kerim, vice-rector of the Nur Mubarak Islamic Culture University, appeared to confirm Telibekov's view that the Muftiate wants complete control of who represents Muslims. "The UMK is an illegal organisation. It's just a bogus outfit. The only organisation that can represent the interests of Muslims is the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan," Shamsudin Kerim told Forum 18.

The UMK is also facing other legal attempts by the Muftiate to close it down (see F18News 20 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=612). Telibekov believes that both court cases, along with a 17 May 2005 fine imposed on him for signing himself in a newspaper article as head of the UMK (see F18News 7 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=599), are "links in the same chain."

Telibekov has maintained for some time that "the state, helped by the Muftiate, is trying to shut down independent Muslim organisations" and believes that the new "national security" laws have exacerbated the problems of independent Muslims (see F18News 20 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=612). Independently of Telibekov, the head of the Internal Policy Department of South Kazakhstan Regional Administration, has told Forum 18 of the state's wish to have centralised control of all of Kazakhstan's mosques to remove "inconsistencies" in "religious rituals" (see F18News 7 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=599). (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=249 and articles on the 2005 "national security" legal amendments at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=608 and http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=625

A printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY