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KAZAKHSTAN: President too busy with "important affairs" to meet Baptists

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Amanbek Mukhashev, head of Kazakhstan's Religious Affairs Committee, has petulantly complained to Forum 18 News Service about a request from a group of Baptist churches to meet President Nursultan Nazarbayev to discuss state harassment of their congregations. "Instead of tearing the President away from important affairs the Baptists would do better to register their churches and not violate the law," he told Forum 18. The Council of Churches Baptists, who have over 100 congregations in Kazakhstan, estimate that more than 40 of their members have been fined for their role in worship services since legal restrictions on religious freedom were made harsher in July 2005. "It is perfectly natural that the President will not meet the Baptists," a Presidential Administration official stated. Pastor Yaroslav Senyushkevich commented to Forum 18 that "we regret that officials have such an attitude towards us."

One month after writing to President Nursultan Nazarbayev seeking a meeting to discuss the harassment of their congregations across Kazakhstan, Council of Churches Baptists have had no response. "We wrote to the president at the end of December but have had no official response," Baptist pastor Yaroslav Senyushkevich told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Astana on 30 January. "We regret that officials have such an attitude towards us." Officials have told Forum 18 that the president has more important business to deal with than meet the Baptists, but refused to say why they have not communicated this to the Baptists.

"After the adoption of amendments to the Law on National Security in July 2005 our situation got considerably worse and we are not prepared to accept this," Senyushkevich told Forum 18. "We still hope that President Nazarbayev will respond to our appeal." He said the Baptists now aim to draw international attention to their situation.

The Council of Churches Baptists, who have more than one hundred congregations both large and small across Kazakhstan, refuse on principle to register with the state as they believe this leads to unwarranted official intrusion into their internal affairs.

The 2005 "national security" legal provisions, like earlier "extremism" legal provisions, substantially restricted freedom of religion and belief. They introduced a specific ban on the activity of unregistered religious organisations into the country's religion law and also introduced fines for such activity in a new Article 374-1 of the Code of Administrative Offences. Council of Churches Baptists are most frequent, but not the only victims of this article. The amendments were heavily criticised in advance by a wide range of human rights and international organisations, including the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (see F18News 15 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=608).

The head of the Public Department of the Presidential Administration, Mirbulat Zakypov, confirmed that the Baptists' letter had arrived and been recorded by his Department of the Administration. "The Baptists are complaining about the change to the law, but this does not fall within the competence of the President," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 29 January. "So it is perfectly natural that the President will not meet the Baptists." He said the letter has been sent on to the Religious Affairs Committee of the Justice Ministry as well as to the General Prosecutor's Office.

Amanbek Mukhashev, the head of the Religious Affairs Committee, confirmed to Forum 18 that his office had received the Baptists' letter. "Instead of tearing the President away from important affairs the Baptists would do better to register their churches and not violate the law," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 24 January.

Pastor Senyushkevich said the situation is "not too difficult" at the moment, but added that the Baptists fear that the authorities are now planning to make policy towards them "much harsher". In particular, they fear that those prosecuted more than once for refusing to register their congregations could in future face criminal rather than administrative prosecution.

In their appeal to the President, the Baptists wrote that they are "forced to write to you as the guarantor of citizens' constitutional rights". They pointed out that in 2005, when parliament was considering adopting the controversial national security amendments, they wrote "numerous letters to you and to parliamentary deputies expressing our concern that the adoption of the law would bring repression of believers".

"We have many facts with documentary confirmation that recently the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of religious confession is being seriously trampled on in our country," they told Nazarbayev. They told him that since the adoption of the amendments in July 2005 more than 40 church members have been subjected to "judicial persecution" on the grounds of their religious convictions.

"Article 374-1, part 2 of the Administrative Code provides for a fantastic fine (100 times the minimum monthly wage) if someone acting in accordance with his conscience comes to pray with his fellow believers in a private house without the permission of the appropriate authorities," they complain. "For failing to pay fines some of our brethren have been detained for several days. In other instances in order to pay the fine hard-earned personal property has been confiscated." They calculate the total amount of fines in administrative cases today at about one million (1,000,000) Tenge (49,795 Norwegian Kroner, 6,105 Euros or 7,910 US Dollars). Average monthly salaries have been estimated to be roughly equivalent to 31,530 Tenge (1,590 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros, or 260 US Dollars).

Among recent Baptist fines known to Forum 18, Pyotr Zimens was in late November 2006 fined 20,600 Tenge (1,020 Norwegian Kroner, 125 Euros, or 160 US Dollars) by Judge M. Nurbekov at Shchuchinsk specialised district court in Akmola region under Article 375, part 1 of the Administrative Code. The fine followed a Prosecutor's Office and police inspection of his church's activity on 15 November. During the court hearing, local "internal policy" official B. Sautov explained that in 2004 and 2005 his officials had met leaders of eight local unregistered religious communities to explain to them the need to register. He said six Muslim organisations had complied.

Also fined on 29 November in a separate case in the town of Sarkand was Anna Bonar, who is from the nearby city of Almaty. She was punished 25,750 Tenge (1,280 Norwegian Kroner, 160 Euros, or 200 US Dollars) for failing to pay an earlier fine for conducting missionary activity in Sarkand without official permission (see F18News 2 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793).

Religious minorities, including other Protestants and Hare Krishna devotees, have faced increasing obstruction of their activity and hostility from officials. Further moves are underway to confiscate more Hare Krishna-owned homes at their commune near Almaty (see F18News 22 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=895 and 31 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=905). (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>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY