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KAZAKHSTAN: Media intolerance "has one source: the KNB secret police"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18, and Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Human rights defenders and religious minorities have complained to Forum 18 News Service of a "wave" of hostile media coverage of religious communities. They think this is part of a government-sponsored campaign to gain greater public acceptance of a new Law restricting freedom of thought, conscience and belief. "All these articles have one source: the KNB secret police," Ninel Fokina, head of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, told Forum 18. Told that journalists and editors had denied this to Forum 18, she responded: "Who's going to admit such coverage is ordered?" Protestants such as Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists and Pentecostals have faced media attacks along with Ahmadi Muslims, the Hare Krishna community and Jehovah's Witnesses. One of many examples of media intolerance is four separate newspapers publishing an identical article attacking the Jehovah's Witnesses. One of the newspapers credited the article to a named former Jehovah's Witness, one credited a different author, and two of the newspapers credited KNB secret police offices in different Kazakh regions.

As Kazakhstan's Constitutional Council prepares to deliver its view of the constitutionality of the highly restrictive Law amending various laws covering religion, human rights defenders and religious minorities have complained to Forum 18 News Service of a "wave" of hostile media coverage of religious communities. They think this is part of a government-sponsored campaign to gain greater public acceptance of the new Law restricting freedom of thought, conscience and belief. "All these articles have one source: the KNB secret police," Ninel Fokina, head of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, told Forum 18 on 5 February. Told that journalists and editors had denied this to Forum 18, she responded: "Who's going to admit such coverage is ordered?"

The controversial new Law has been considered by the Constitutional Council since 8 January. In a brief announcement posted to its website today (5 February), it stated that the Law will be discussed at a meeting in the capital Astana, on the morning of 10 February.

Fokina told Forum 18 that Nikolai Belorukov from the Constitutional Council will present its view of the Law, while invited experts are expected to speak also. She said the public are allowed to attend such sessions by arrangement. She added that Constitutional Council decisions are generally released a day or two after such sessions.

The announcement of 10 February as the date when the Constitutional Council will hold its meeting on the Law came the day after the Legal Opinion by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on the draft Law was made public. The OSCE Legal Opinion – prepared by the OSCE/ODIHR Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief – makes very serious criticisms of the Law, finding that "significant outstanding issues remain if the law is to be brought into full compliance with Kazakhstan's OSCE commitments and other international standards" (see F18News 4 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1249).

Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee said coverage of religious issues in Kazakhstan's media is now ten times greater than five years ago, with about seventy percent of such coverage consisting of hostile attacks on religious communities. She said organising such coverage falls within the "ideological work" each Akimat (administration) undertakes. She said that Kazakhstan's media are so dependent on government resources that they cannot refuse to publish material officials want to see published.

The state-controlled mass media has regularly been used to promote intolerance of religious organisations the authorities dislike, as well as support for the draft Law's restrictions on freedom of thought, conscience and belief (see eg. F18News 30 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1123).

Forum 18 notes that prosecutors repeatedly tell the Kazakh media of cases where "dangerous" or "illegal" religious literature is confiscated and individuals are punished for often unspecified "illegal" religious activity. In its report of its activity in 2008 posted to the General Prosecutor's Office website on 29 January, the Kyzyl-Orda Prosecutor's Office reported checking up on local religious organisations, political parties and the media, resulting in 12 unnamed individuals being prosecuted under the Code of Administrative Offences. One woman, G. Asylova, was also reported as having been punished administratively on 20 October 2008 for "violating the procedure for conducting religious events".

Akmolinskaya Pravda, a Russian-language newspaper, reported on 13 December 2008 that local officials had taken part in a July 2008 training seminar on "legal aspects of the struggle with totalitarian religious cults". Volunteers from Zhas Otan, the youth division of the ruling Nur Otan party, were brought in to help in the "struggle" with such groups, while lectures were held at colleges. The paper said a Centre to Help the Victims of Destructive Religious Movements had also been set up in Kokshetau, one of several in the country. Kazakhstan Today reported on 22 November that at its opening ceremony, Gulmira Karimova, deputy head of the Regional Akimat's Department of Social Policy, said the authorities are concerned by the attraction of young people to "pseudo-spiritual movements".

Individual, named communities are often singled out for hostile coverage. "A great wave of newspaper articles against Protestants has begun," one Protestant who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 in mid-January. "I believe this is designed to influence the Constitutional Council's decision on the new Law."

Among many recent articles seen by Forum 18, on 16 January the Russian-language paper Kazakhstanskaya Pravda criticised the Grace Church's activity across the country. The Church has faced repeated raids and pressure and a ban on its senior pastor – a US citizen - from entering the country (see F18News 30 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1078).

The article, by a freelance contributor Roman Tkachev, reported that 44 church members had faced legal cases and more than ten foreigners associated with the church had been expelled. It said the church was engaged in "subversive activity" and embezzlement, and concluded: "As long as such religious movements function in the country, society – and that means each of us – will remain in danger. So do we need such 'Grace'?" The article did not include any response to such accusations from Church members.

The following day Grace Church was attacked in Ekspress K newspaper by its Taraz correspondent, Gulzhan Asanova, who claimed that Justice Ministry experts had found that a sermon in its local congregation had incited "religious intolerance". She said the preacher, whom she did not name, faced criminal trial for inciting religious and ethnic hatred under Article 164, Part 2 of the Criminal Code. This appears to be a reference to Sarybai Tanabaev (see F18News 12 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1229).

Both newspapers – which drew entirely on material from state security agencies such as the KNB secret police - rejected suggestions that the articles had been part of any campaign against religious minorities timed to coincide with consideration of the new Law. Sergei Volkov, deputy editor of Kazakhstanskaya Pravda with responsibility for the Friday edition where the article was published, laughed at the suggestion. "I can say firmly it was not part of any campaign," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 5 February. "We gave space to a journalist and he presented this material, that's all."

Asked whether the journalist could have been working with the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police or the Police, Volkov said it was "one hundred per cent not true". Asked whether he was concerned that the article described the Grace Church as dangerous without giving church members the chance to respond, he declared "No, I'm not worried."

Equally insistent that her article was not part of any campaign against religious minorities was Asanova of Ekspress K. She told Forum 18 from Taraz on 5 February that she had read about the church in a local paper and had approached the security agencies for more information. Asked why the article did not have any response from church members, she responded: "I didn't ask them. I was only interested in the fact that a criminal case is due to go to court and I didn't name the man or say he was guilty." She said church members could have contacted the paper after the article was published but had not done so. She told Forum 18 she was unaware that the same Church had been written about the day before in Kazakhstanskaya Pravda.

But not only have Protestant communities such as the Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists and Pentecostals faced media attacks, hostile coverage has extended to Ahmadi Muslims, the Hare Krishna community and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Growing use in the media is being made of claims by individuals who have left such communities. Former Jehovah's Witness Bakhitbek Tarzhanov and former Ahmadis Aleksei Tolchennikov and Yerlan Bektimirov have repeatedly been interviewed on television and in the press criticising their former faiths. On 1 December the KTK commercial television station interviewed the two former Ahmadis, declaring in its summary: "The new Religion Law must be harsher – that's the view of former sectarians".

Nurym Taibek of the Ahmadi community told Forum 18 on 4 February that Tolchennikov had been excluded from the community for drinking alcohol and financial impropriety and complained that he "earned money" by repeating allegations in the media. He also complained that their representatives had been invited several times to filmed debates with representatives of the state-backed Muslim Board and while "slandorous" comments about the Ahmadi community were shown on television, their own responses were cut out. He said the 31 Kanal television station repeatedly showed such material.

Four separate newspapers published an identical article attacking the Jehovah's Witnesses, and quoting their former member Tarzhanov, in February and March 2008. In a clear signal of the involvement of the KNB secret police, one of the newspapers gave Tarzhanov as the author, one credited a different name Kharuan Yakhniya, one the KNB for Atyrau Region and one the KNB for Almaty Region.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 from Almaty that Tarzhanov could be being used to discredit the organisation through the media. "Similar media attacks took place earlier too." They said it is unclear whether it is coincidence that articles against Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious groups coincided with the new Law reaching its last stage. "However, if it enters into force, the Religion Law would seriously restrict the practice of our religion."

The hostile press coverage also coincides with the launch of a new network, the Association of Centres for Work with Victims of Destructive Religious Movements, of which the Kokshetau centre is a part. A centre was originally founded by Yulia Denisenko in Kostanai several years ago, but, as she told Forum 18 on 5 February, she now has seven centres in the Association. "An eighth is being opened now and by the end of the year we will have a centre in each region of Kazakhstan."

She said the centres work against religious movements that are "against the family, the individual, society and the state". She did not name any groups she believe fall into this category, referring Forum 18 to the website run by the Moscow-based anti-cult activist Aleksandr Dvorkin who, she said, first gave her the idea of launching such work in Kazakhstan.

Denisenko insisted to Forum 18 that her centre in Kostanai and the Association are non-governmental organisations, but admitted that the bulk of the funding comes from the government. "We draw up projects and enter them in competitions for government funds and get support if we win." She said the centres also retain close ties with local Akimats, the Justice Ministry, the Culture Ministry and the Presidential Administration, but "most of all" with the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee.

A supporter of the proposed new Law, Denisenko said the Religious Affairs Committee and the two chambers of Parliament had invited her several times to take part in public discussions of the Law, paying her travel costs. "I gave my recommendations. If they want someone to be there it's normal for them to pay for the trip."

Mirambai Kemalov, Head of the Analytical Department of the Constitutional Council, told Forum 18 on 4 February that it is not authorised to answer whether the recent arrests of members of religious groups and media attacks against various religious communities is related to the moves to adopt the new Law.

Zhanna Onlasheva, a legal expert at the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, said the media attacks and arrests of religious believers were not being done to prove any point and have no connection to the process of new law's adoption.

"The New Law is not against religious organisations," she claimed to Forum 18 from Astana on 4 February. "On the contrary: many articles which could have made the Law stricter were removed during parliamentary discussions." She claimed that discussions had been "completely open" and that the views of religious communities had been listened to. "They never told us anything like the new Law was threatening their existence."

However, religious believers and human rights defenders have made numerous repeated criticisms of the Law (see eg. F18News 22 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1234).

Onlasheva of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed that it is in constant touch with OSCE experts to improve the Law. "It's not perfect but it is much more lenient towards religious organisations than say, in Azerbaijan, or other countries of Central Asia."

She refused to say whether the Religious Affairs Committee at the Justice Ministry considers Ahmadis, Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists, Baptists, and Hare Krishna devotees as "dangerous" for society. The Justice Ministry has supported screenings of a film claiming that the Hare Krishna faith incites devotees to commit murder (see F18News 9 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1238). Onlasheva said she first needed to find out who Forum 18 is. (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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