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KAZAKHSTAN: "Struggle against religious extremism must be carried out on all fronts"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Kazakhstan has left threats to deport Viktor Leven "hanging in the air", he has told Forum 18 News Service. The now-stateless Baptist, who is Kazakh-born, was convicted of missionary activity without state permission, and because he and his wife do not have passports they cannot either obtain paid work or travel by train. He and his family live on what they can grow themselves. Another Baptist, Zhanna-Tereza Raudovich, who was fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage for hosting worship in her home, has had an appeal against the fine rejected and has appealed to the Supreme Court. Akmola Regional Police held a seminar on ways of struggling against religious extremism, during which Baptists were associated with terrorism. Asked why this association was made, police told Forum 18 that Baptists were not extremists but they "do violate the law often" as they continue religious activity without official registration. Attendees at the seminar included members of President Nursultan Nazarbaev's Nur Otan political party.

Kazakhstan continues to attack freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service has found. Zhanna-Tereza Raudovich, a Baptist fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage for hosting worship in her home, has had an appeal against the fine rejected. Another Baptist, Viktor Leven, and his family still face the threat of deportation and – as they are stateless – cannot gain paid work. Also, police in Akmola Region held a seminar with official agencies and President Nursultan Nazarbaev's political party on so-called "religious extremism". The main target seemed to be Baptists, because they exercise the internationally-recognised right to freedom of religion or belief without state permission.

100 times minimum monthly salary fine appeal rejected

Judge Amangeldy Anuarbekov of the southern Kyzylorda [Qyzlorda] Regional Appeal Court on 11 February upheld a fine of 100 times the minimum monthly wage against Zhanna-Tereza Raudovich, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. She was fined 141,300 Tenge (5,713 Norwegian Kroner, 699 Euros or 955 US Dollars) by Kazaly District Court on 20 January for hosting worship in her home (see F18News 8 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1405).

Judge Anuarbekov said that Raudovich has appealed to the Supreme Court. "Her neighbours complain that the meetings in her home disturb them," he told Forum 18 on 19 March. He refused to comment on what unregistered religious groups or individuals should do when they want to peacefully worship. "This is not the first time she has been tried for violation of the Religion Law," the Judge responded, when told that it is difficult for unregistered religious organisations to rent public meeting places.

Marat Dadikbay, Head of the Internal Policy Department at Kyzylorda Regional Administration, told Forum 18 on 30 March that Kazakhstan's law does not allow unregistered religious groups to rent public places. He further declined to discuss Raudovich's case and referred Forum 18 to his deputy Nurkhan (the last name was not given).

Nurkhan said that the "predominant majority" of the population of Kazaly District, where Raudovich lives, is traditional Muslim. "The local people do not welcome any missionary activity among them," he said when asked why Raudovich was given a huge fine for peacefully worshipping in her home with fellow believers.

However, Nurkhan said that he did not know of any conflict to date between the Baptists and local people.

"Some kind of legal remedy must be found"

Nurkhan said that he did not know where the Baptists or other unregistered groups should hold their worship. "Some kind of legal remedy must be found for these groups," he responded when told that the Baptists refuse to register on principle, and they keep getting fined by the courts for unregistered religious activity. "I don't know what that remedy can be since the law bans unregistered religious activity."

Equally pessimistic about the possibility of legal remedies for unregistered religious activity was Judge Anuarbekov. "I understand the issue but cannot change the law. You need to talk to Parliament about it," he told Forum 18 when asked why groups who do not

want to register as legal persons are not permitted to gather for peaceful worship.

Deportation threat "hanging in the air"

Official threats to deport Viktor Leven and his family, who are Baptists from Akmola Region close to the capital Astana, are still "hanging in the air", he told Forum 18 on 30 March. Leven – who was born in Kazakhstan but lived outside the country between 1992 and 2000 – was ordered to be deported after he was convicted of "missionary activity" without state permission, an "offence" mandating deportation when conducted by a foreign citizen (see F18News 8 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1405).

Leven, who is currently stateless, said that he was asked by the Migration Police to reclaim the German citizenship he has renounced. "I was told that only after that would I would be given permission to stay in Kazakhstan. But," he told Forum 18, "I don't want to do that because I am afraid that I would be deported to Germany as soon as I receive German citizenship." Leven said that most of his relatives live in Kazakhstan, and that he wanted to live close to his relatives. He complained that he did not see why Kazakhstan should deport him from the country he was born in.

Asylguz Syzdykova, the official of the Akmola Migration Police who is overseeing Leven's case, confirmed to Forum 18 on 30 March that the Migration Police has asked Leven to reclaim his German citizenship. "Please write us an official letter, and we will answer you," she responded when told that Leven did not want leave Kazakhstan, and further asked when the authorities were planning to deport him. She declined to discuss his case further with Forum 18.

Earlier, on 19 March, Syzdykova told Forum 18 that the Migration Police is aware that the Supreme Court has refused to hear Leven's case, and that the General Prosecutor's office also has refused to re-examine a complaint he has made about the way his case was treated (see F18News 8 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1405).

Impossible to gain paid work or travel by rail

Leven said that he and his wife are in a "very difficult" situation because of not having passports. "Both my wife and I do not have any citizenship now, and therefore it is impossible for us to travel outside Kazakhstan." He added that it is also not possible for them to travel within Kazakhstan by train, since they cannot show passports to buy tickets.

Leven also complained that he and his wife also cannot gain paid work, to make a living for their family of eight people. Leven has six children, the youngest of which is several months old and the oldest is nine years old. "We have a small plot of land attached to our house, and we live on the produce we grow," he said.

"Struggle against religious extremism must be carried out on all fronts"

On 3 March the national newspaper Liter published an article (also reproduced on the Interior Ministry website) entitled "Struggle against religious extremism must be carried out on all fronts." The article stated that Akmola Regional Police initiated and held a seminar-consultation on ways of struggling against religious extremism and the preservation of inter-ethnic and inter-religious accord. Alongside the police, participants in the seminar included officials from the National Security Committee (KNB) secret Police, the regional Prosecutor's Office, the regional Justice Department, the state-funded Centre for Assistance to Victims of Destructive Religious Movements, unnamed "traditional religions", members of the official Assembly of People of Kazakhstan (which is chaired by President Nazarbaev), as well as the President's Nur Otan political party.

The article went on to attack Baptists – the only named religious group targeted – quoting police as stating that in their work preventing religious extremism "the Evangelical Baptists are the main lawbreakers on religion". Police also claimed that "six of their leaders in the region were punished under the Administrative Code," before the article claims that "fortunately in 2009 no extremism or terrorism crimes took place in the territory of Akmola region. However, it is no reason for complacency."

The state-funded Centre for Assistance to Victims of Destructive Religious Movements has previously – in association with the KNB secret police - been involved in media attacks on Baptists exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 1 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1380).

Baptist terrorists?

Asked why Baptists were associated at the seminar with terrorism and extremism, Police Major Gulnara Pinchuk, Akmola Regional Police spokesperson, told Forum 18 on 31 March that the Baptists are not considered by the authorities as extremists. However, she stated that they "do violate the law often" as they continue religious activity without official registration.

Asked why Baptists were named at the seminar, Major Pinchuk could not explain to Forum 18 why the Baptists were discussed. She then claimed that there is no official opposition against Baptists. Asked why the authorities bring so many cases against peaceful Baptists, she said that "administrative cases against them are brought by the prosecution agencies, not the police".

Major Pinchuk could not name any religious group which was considered at the seminar as extremist or terrorist. Asked by Forum 18 about other religious groups also targeted by the authorities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees, she stated that these groups are not considered to be either extremist or terrorist.

Police in Kazakhstan have previously sought to publicly link religious activity without state permission and terrorism (see F18News 28 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=921).

Why is the President's political party involved?

Pinchuk stated that the reason Nur Otan members were invited is because they take active part in every sphere of life in Kazakhstan. Asked why members of other political parties were not invited, she said that "it is difficult for me to explain since I did not draw up the list of invitees".

President Nazarbaev has told Nur Otan – which is the only party in the lower house of the Parliament - that "it is necessary to suppress the activity of illegal religious movements in Kazakhstan" (see F18News 5 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1081).

The authorities intend to introduce in 2011 a law similar to a 2008-9 draft Law restricting freedom of religion or belief, which was condemned by Kazakh and international human rights defenders (see F18News 8 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1360). The proposed new Administrative Code being considered by Parliament continues current penalties for exercising freedom of religion or belief, including punishments for worship without state registration (see F18News 10 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1407).

"Traditional religions"

Major Pinchuk told Forum 18 that the unnamed "traditional religions" invited were representatives of the Central Mosque in Kokshetau, and the Russian Orthodox Church. She could not explain why other religious communities or the Baptists themselves were not invited. (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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>.

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