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KAZAKHSTAN: Not banned, merely "recommends refraining from inviting"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The organisers of a conference in Kazakhstan have been told that five foreign Protestant guest speakers could not come. Ershat Ongarov of the Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA) wrote stating that the ARA "recommends refraining from inviting" them. This follows an ARA ban on a well-known Russian Muslim author visiting to present his books in bookshops and universities. Ongarov insisted to Forum 18 News Service that religious organisations can invite foreign visitors to religious events under the new Religion Law. "We did not issue a ban on these pastors visiting", but he refused to say how else his letter could be interpreted. Asked whether this was not unwarranted state interference in the freedoms of assembly and of speech, Ongarov laughed but refused to answer. ARA Chair Kairat Lama Sharif has stated that regulations to cover both foreigners and citizens engaged in undefined "missionary activity" and "spreading a faith" would "form a system of measures for prevention and countering of the destructive influence of several non-traditional religious organisations on the process of the spiritual/moral development of Kazakh society".

Four days before the start of a large Protestant conference in Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty, officials told the New Life Church that five foreign Protestant pastors already advertised as guest speakers could not come. Officials have insisted to Forum 18 News Service that the five pastors were not banned from visiting Kazakhstan, but the Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA) merely "recommends refraining from inviting" them. This follows an ARA ban on a well-known Russian Muslim author visiting to present his books in bookshops and universities.

Meanwhile, mosques and churches in the Almaty's Turksib District have been given questionnaires to fill in and have been instructed to report "on a daily basis" what measures they are taking to counter extremism, Forum 18 has learned (see F18News 24 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1638).

These moves follow the adoption in October of two laws seriously restricting freedom of religion or belief. Even before the new laws had come into force, officials had begun to close mosques, churches and prayer rooms in prisons (see F18News 11 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1635). Muslim and Russian Orthodox prayer rooms in social care institutions are also being closed, the first known closures being in a care home in Almaty (see F18News 15 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1636).

"Recommends refraining from inviting"

The New Life Protestant Church held a conference from 11 to 13 November at its centre in Almaty, attended by about 1,500 people. However, five foreign pastors due to address the conference – two from Russia and one each from Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Latvia – were unable to come. The Church had advertised the five as speaking at the conference since October. Four of the five did not need visas to visit Kazakhstan, but all chose not to come at the last minute after the ban.

The Church had written on 14 October to the Almaty Department of the Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA) seeking permission to invite the five foreign pastors to speak at their conference. However, on 7 November, in a letter seen by Forum 18, the acting head of the Department, Ershat Ongarov, wrote back to say that it "recommends refraining from inviting" the five named pastors. The letter gave no reason for the ARA's decision.

On 7 November, the Church then wrote to the ARA in the capital Astana. However, in its response signed by the "responsible secretary" Malik Murzalin – also seen by Forum 18 – the Agency made no direct reference to the "recommendation" not to invite the foreigners. He told the Church that after the new Religion Law, regulations to enact it were still being drawn up, including "regulations on the registration of foreign missionaries, which will be confirmed in the near future". He added that this will govern the registration of all "foreign missionaries".

Imam's visit "inappropriate"

On 6 September, just two weeks before a prospective visit to Kazakhstan by Imam Shamil Alyautdinov of Moscow's Memorial

Mosque, Marat Azilkhanov, Deputy Chair of the ARA, had written to the state-favoured Muslim Board saying the visit was "inappropriate". The ARA quoted the new Religion law as justifying the ban on the visit and book presentations in universities and bookshops. Following much criticism of the ban in the Kazakh and Russian media, the ARA later claimed in mid-October to have revoked the ban, but insisted the imam could only speak in places of worship and all the books he was intending to present needed to be approved by the ARA (see F18News 21 October 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1628).

Imam Alyautdinov's assistant, Zenur Yusipov, told Forum 18 from Moscow on 22 November that the imam is not currently planning a visit to Kazakhstan as "he has lots of work here in Moscow". However, he said he does intend to visit in future.

"We did not issue a ban"?

Ongarov of the ARA in Almaty insisted to Forum 18 that religious organisations can invite foreign visitors to religious events under the new Religion Law. "We did not issue a ban on these pastors visiting," he told Forum 18 from Almaty on 21 November. However, he refused to say how else the letter could be interpreted. Asked whether this was not unwarranted state interference in the freedom of assembly and freedom of speech of those attending the conference, Ongarov laughed, but refused to answer.

Ongarov refused to say what would have happened to the five pastors had they arrived in Kazakhstan and spoken at the conference. However, church members told Radio Free Europe's Kazakh Service on 18 November that one official had told them that "speakers conducting religious activity without registration as a missionary would have to be detained, fined and deported from the country".

The telephone of Murzalin of the ARA in Astana went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 21 and 22 November.

How many foreign religious workers will be allowed?

Once the new regulations governing foreign religious workers are approved, registration of them will be the responsibility not of local administrations but of local Departments of the ARA. It remains unclear how many the ARA will allow to remain.

ARA Chair Kairat Lama Sharif told the Liter newspaper of 15 November that as of 1 October, a total of 310 foreign citizens had registration for religious work in Kazakhstan. Of them, 124 were Catholic, 90 of various Protestant churches, 48 Muslim, 42 Russian Orthodox, five Jews and one Buddhist.

Unlike the previous system, the new Religion Law requires compulsory state registration as "missionaries" of both foreign citizens conducting religious work in Kazakhstan, and citizens of Kazakhstan engaged in "spreading a faith" or "missionary activity". Both terms are undefined, and anyone carrying out these activities without state permission will be liable to punishment (see F18News 23 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1617).

"A system of measures for prevention"

Lama Sharif insisted that the new regulations for "missionary activity" and "spreading a faith" being prepared by the ARA and the Interior Ministry would "form a system of measures for prevention and countering of the destructive influence of several non-traditional religious organisations on the process of the spiritual/moral development of Kazakh society". He did not identify which "non-traditional" religious organisations are or why, if such groups are "destructive", prosecutions have not been brought against them.

Archbishop Tomasz Peta, the Polish-born head of the Catholic Diocese of Astana, told Forum 18 that while he is a Kazakh citizen, many of the country's Catholic bishops, priests and nuns are foreign citizens. "I hope that under the new system, they will be able to get full one year visas, rather than six-month visas as at present," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 22 November.

Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Aleksandr (Mogilev) of Astana and Almaty and his assistant, Bishop Gennady (Gogolev) of Kaskelen, are both Russian citizens and will need to gain registration. "No one has raised the question that they will have to leave," Fr Aleksandr Suvorov of the Astana and Almaty Diocese told Forum 18 on 7 November. (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Kazakhstan>.

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