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KAZAKHSTAN: Do Police and KNB want to catch criminals?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The police and KNB secret police have shown much more interest in the legal missionary activity of a Protestant church, than in apprehending and prosecuting a group of people who on two separate occasions physically attacked the Pastor and church members, punching them, throwing them from a moving lorry, stealing and destroying religious literature, as well as stealing money and a mobile phone. Such attacks are illegal under Kazakh law, but the police and KNB have repeatedly refused to explain to the church, to the chairman of the Association of Religious Organisations of Kazakhstan, and to Forum 18 why they seem more interested in missionaries than criminals.

The pastor of a Protestant church in the town of Karaganda [Qaraghandy], 250 kilometres (155 miles) south east of the capital Astana, has complained that the police and KNB secret police have been more interested in investigating their missionary activity in the village of Zhaksy in July than in identifying a group of people who physically attacked them. "After our conversations with the law-enforcement agencies and officers of the KNB I have the impression that the authorities consider us to be the main violators of the law and not the hooligans who attacked us," Vladimir Smely, pastor of the Grace Rakym Christian Missionary Centre who was among those attacked, told Forum 18 from Karaganda on 7 October. "The questions we were asked in both institutions basically related to our activity and not to the details of the attack on us. As far as I know the KNB is continuing its investigation in Zhaksy, but the officers of the special services are interested only in us and not in the hooligans who attacked us." Under Kazakh law, missionary activity is legal.

In response to the church's complaint, the deputy prosecutor of Akmola region, Erbulat Bolgobayev, assured the missionaries on 6 September that "clarification had been sought from the residents of Zhaksy" and that church members' complaint "would be examined". Since then there appears to have been no progress.

Forum 18 has failed in its attempts to find out why the attackers are not being prosecuted. On 7 October Forum 18 reached Bolgobayev's office by phone. His secretary, admitting that her boss was in the office, enquired in detail about the purpose of Forum 18's call. However, after speaking with Bolgobayev, she said that he was busy and asked Forum 18 to phone later. After this Forum 18 phoned five times, but each time the secretary said that Bolgobayev was not in his office.

The Grace Rakym church in Karaganda, with about 4,000 members, is the Kazakhstan headquarters of the Korean-led Presbyterian church, which also has branches in many towns across the country. Church members report that during their mission on 20 July in Zhaksy, a settlement in Akmola region 400 kilometres (250 miles) west of Astana, a group of local Muslims attacked them. They punched the missionaries, took from them their religious literature and immediately destroyed it. The mob then deported them from the settlement by forcibly putting them on a train.

In a 3 August open letter to the prosecutor general describing how they were attacked, the missionaries reported that when they were being forced onto the train they asked the duty policeman for help, but he simply turned away and pretended not to hear them.

When the missionaries returned to the settlement on 27 July, local people wrapped clothes round their faces and forced them onto a lorry. During the ride in the lorry the attackers demanded that the missionaries should accept Islam. Then they were thrown from the lorry one by one with their belongings. The attackers also took from the missionaries all their Christian literature, 3000 tenge (150 Norwegian kroner, 18 Euros or 22 US dollars) and a mobile phone. The missionaries' attempts after these attacks to appeal to the Zhaksy police were fruitless, as the police refused to take a statement from them.

"The most surprising thing is that no criminal case was opened against the attackers," Roman Dudnik, chairman of the Protestant Emmanuel Association, told Forum 18 in the southern city of Almaty on 6 October, especially in the light of Bolgobayev's September promises to investigate. "According to the law a criminal case should be opened as soon as a crime is discovered. One gets the impression that the authorities are trying to hush up this case."

On 3 August, the chairman of the Association of Religious Organisations of Kazakhstan, Aleksandr Klyushev, wrote to the KNB to ask why no action had been taken against those who attacked the missionaries. "The Committee of National Security of the Republic of Kazakhstan has thoroughly investigated on the spot in Zhaksy the facts outlined in your appeal," the KNB responded in a letter

cited on 30 September on the Virtual Astana website.

The KNB went on to state that Pastor Smely and five other church members "spent three weeks actively promoting the ideas of the Presbyterian Christian faith among the inhabitants of the settlement of Zhaksy, including among Muslims, as evidenced by their visiting the homes of local residents, holding religious conversations with them proposing that they renounce Islam and inviting them to services". The KNB alleged that, after speaking to pupils of the grammar school, that the missionaries gave them free gifts "such as pens, bracelets and sweets" and invited them to sporting events held in the school grounds and also to a "free lunch" in the Tip-top cafe. "During the sporting events and the lunch the missionaries forced the children to pray and to repeat various prayers in praise of Jesus," the KNB claimed.

"These events were organised without the permission of the parents, which is a violation of the legislation on freedom of religious confession," the KNB letter also alleged. "The above-mentioned actions of the representatives of Grace Rakym caused a negative response on the part of the local population and believers of the Birlik mosque, which led to the conflict. It was not possible to establish specific individuals who participated in this conflict."

However, Pastor Smely denied to Forum 18 the KNB's allegations that church members had forced any children to pray. He also insisted that church members only played football and other sports with children whose parents had not given permission for their children to join in religious activities.

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249

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