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KAZAKHSTAN: Schoolchildren told prayer "causes death" and suicide bombers

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Teachers north of the capital Astana are putting pressure on children not to attend Protestant prayer meetings, telling children that prayer "can even cause death," Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Children who attend prayer meetings are kept behind after school for "educational talks" in which they have been told that they are being turned into "shahids and zombies". (The Islamic term "shahid" is frequently used in former Soviet countries to describe suicide bombers.) Parents have been ordered by teachers not to take their children to prayer meetings. The head of the regional Education Department has confirmed to Forum 18 that she ordered "educational work" with children who attend prayer meetings, and also that the national Education Ministry orders officials "at every meeting" to stop children going to church. Religious believers in Kazakhstan link these ongoing actions of the Education Ministry with current parliamentary moves to seriously restrict the religious freedom of all faiths.

The authorities in the village of Krasnoyarka, 70 kilometres (45 miles) north of the capital Astana, are putting pressure on schoolchildren who attend Christian prayer meetings, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Igor Tsai, pastor of the Protestant Agape church in Astana, told Forum 18 on 9 May that teachers are conducting atheist propaganda during lessons. For example, teachers have told 8 year old children that it is very harmful to pray and that it "can even cause death." After school, children who attend prayer meetings are kept in school for "educational talks" by teachers, during which the children are told that they are being turned into "shahids and zombies". The Islamic term "shahid" is frequently used in former Soviet countries to describe suicide bombers.

Almost all the Protestant parents in Krasnoyarka have been told by teachers not to take their children to prayer meetings. Tsai believes that the teachers' actions have been carried out on the orders of higher authority. "The authorities dislike our church. In April this year, when we applied for state registration, as part of the process the authorities told church members to state not only their place of work, but also which political parties they supported, but also their hobbies and even their zodiac sign." Being asked to name their zodiac sign is offensive to Christians, who do not believe in horoscopes.

Olga Mozhayeva, head of the Education Department of Tselinograd district, which includes Krasnoyarka, admitted to Forum 18 in Astana on 19 May, that she had ordered "educational work" with children who attend Protestant prayer meetings. "We have received reports that the Protestants have been working actively with children, and have also been engaged in charitable work. They are distributing expensive presents, which people cannot afford, only to families whose children attend church," Mozhayeva claimed. She produced no evidence for her claims.

According to Mozhayeva, the headteacher of Krasnoyarka school has been told to offer more out-of-school clubs to dissuade schoolchildren from going to church. However, Mozhayeva categorically denied that she had told the head to engage in atheist propaganda. "That was on the personal initiative of the Krasnoyarka teachers," she insisted to Forum 18. "If the teachers really did tell the schoolchildren such nonsense about believers, they will be punished. We will launch an investigation."

Mozhayeva confirmed earlier information that the national Ministry of Education and Science has told teachers to try to stop schoolchildren from attending churches. "There has been no official order. But we are told this at every meeting," she told Forum 18. "We cannot prevent a schoolchild from attending church. But we do have the authority to set up out-of-school clubs meeting a range of interests, so that a child will have neither the time nor the desire to attend church."

The Ministry of Education and Science has earlier issued a written instruction to headteachers "not to permit teachers or pupils to visit religious associations and confessions," forced schoolchildren in central Kazakhstan to answer a questionnaire about their religious beliefs and whether they attend a place of worship, banned under-18s from going to places of worship or Sunday School, as well as ordering compulsory "educational work" with children who disobey the ban. This is illegal under Kazakh law and was thought then to be part of a wider increase in state action against religious activity in Kazakhstan (see F18News 20 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=494).

Aleksandr Klyushev, head of the Association of Religious Organisations of Kazakhstan, linked the problems in schools with current parliamentary moves to restrict religious freedom for all faiths (see F18News 3 May 2005

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=561). "We can interpret the education ministry initiatives as part of a deliberate policy by the state to restrict believers' rights," he told Forum 18 in Astana on 19 May.

For a personal commentary on current legal moves to seriously restrict religious freedom in Kazakhstan under the guise of "national security", 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=249

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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