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KAZAKHSTAN: "International agreements are nothing to us"

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

In continuing Kazakh state intolerance of religious freedom, two recent attacks on religious minorities have been accompanied by hostile TV coverage, Forum 18 News Service has found. Following police raids on an unregistered Baptist Church in north-west Kazakhstan, local TV has repeatedly shown film of the church shot by the police, with a hostile commentary. Asked why the Baptists were being persecuted merely because they refused to register – as is their right under international human rights agreements Kazakhstan has signed – Serozhatdin Baryshev, head of the regional Justice Department, told Forum 18 that "international agreements are nothing to us – we're governed by the laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan," adding the comment that "you're going against the norms of the Kazakh nation." Hare Krishna devotees, struggling against the authorities' attempts to bulldoze houses and seize property of a commune, have also complained about TV broadcasts "full of lies and inaccuracies," attacking the devotees' defence of their religious freedom. They have also told Forum 18 of aggression against devotees, sparked by the broadcasts.

In continuing Kazakh state intolerance of religious freedom, two recent government attacks on religious minorities have been accompanied by hostile television coverage, in one case using police video footage, Forum 18 News Service has found. Pastor Andrei Grigoryev, who leads a Baptist church in the town of Aktobe [Aqtöbe] in north-west Kazakhstan, said that, following police raids, local television has repeatedly shown police film footage of the church with a hostile commentary. After the most recent police raid on 21 May, the TV station stated that Grigoryev was, as the pastor, facing criminal prosecution for leading a church closed down by a court. Grigoryev told Forum 18 that he has not received the required formal notification of this prosecution by the authorities.

The congregation, which has been ordered to close down because it is not registered, belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register with the authorities in post-Soviet countries. However, Professor Roman Podoprigora, a Kazakh law professor specialising in religious law, has pointed out that the law contradicts itself over whether or not registration is compulsory (see F18News 8 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701).

However, Serozhatdin Baryshev, head of the Aktobe regional Justice Administration, vigorously defended the action against the church because it refused to register. "If they won't register that's against the law - they must act on a legal basis in accordance with the law," he told Forum 18 from Aktobe on 2 June. "Let Baptists, Hindus, Buddhists exist here, but only if they function in accordance with the law."

Asked why the Baptists were being persecuted merely because they refused to register – as is their right under international human rights agreements Kazakhstan has signed – Baryshev retorted: "International agreements are nothing to us – we're governed by the laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan. I don't make the laws, nor does my department. That's done by Parliament." Told that international human rights standards do not require religious communities – such as Grigoryev's Baptist church – to register before they can function, he responded: "You're going against the norms of the Kazakh nation." However, he declined to identify these norms and put the phone down.

"People who know us well know that what they said on television was all lies and slander," Pastor Grigoryev told Forum 18 from Aktobe on 1 June. "But most people don't know us and heard about us only through the television – and they might think the actions against us are justified."

The Aktobe Baptist congregation was subjected to a police raid during the Sunday service on 26 February, where church members were filmed against their will. "We said they couldn't come in to film, so they filmed the congregation from the corridor," Grigoryev told Forum 18. "Local television kept repeating the police's video footage with hostile commentary almost every day after that."

Grigoryev also told Forum 18 that, when pictures were shown of a discussion he had in a corridor with local officials – in which Grigoryev defended his and his congregation's right to worship freely - none of his words were heard on the broadcast. "They showed the pictures, but didn't let viewers hear my arguments - they added their own hostile commentary. They complained that many children were present, although we have every right to bring up our children to have faith in God. They showed church members with bags, trying to make out there is something hidden going on. They tried to show us as a secretive, suspicious group because we refused to let them in to film – even though this is my house." He said the church is open to all to attend.

The involvement of children under 18 years old in religious activity has been a target of the Kazakh authorities' hostility (see F18News 8 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701).

On 24 April Grigoryev was fined 5,150 Tenge (259 Norwegian Kroner, 33 Euros, or 43 US Dollars) under Article 375 part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences for refusing to register his congregation, whose activity was also "banned". Average monthly salaries have been estimated to be roughly equivalent to 260 US Dollars (1,589 Norwegian Kroner, 204 Euros, or 31,535 Tenge).

In May, Grigoryev said, a television crew had come to the church building on a day when no services were taking place. "They filmed one church member who said she did not want to be interviewed on camera, and used this to pretend that we were suspicious." Grigoryev added that the local newspaper, Aktyubinsky Vestnik, had also published articles in Kazakh and Russian about the church, which he termed "patent slander".

During the 21 May raid by four police officers, police videoed the congregation against their wishes while the service continued and counted participants. The police demanded that Grigoryev explain why he was leading a worship service after a court had ruled to ban the activity of his unregistered community.

Following the 21 May raid and the TV broadcast claiming that he faced criminal prosecution, Grigoryev stated that a local religious affairs official had visited him at home on 29 May and tried to pressure him to write a statement about his activity. He said the official had indicated that no criminal prosecution is now underway, but that the case had been handed over to him. "I don't know whether to believe him or not, but I told him I'm not afraid," Grigoryev told Forum 18. He insists that his church has no intention of closing down. "The Lord Jesus created the church – they can't close it down."

Grigoryev also said that he and another church member had been fined in 2005 for religious activity and that, when they refused to pay, property was confiscated from his colleague to pay the fines. "They didn't break up our service then, or film us against our will," he told Forum 18. "In some ways it is now worse. There's a constant cycle of raid, court, fine, raid, court, fine."

Among other recent cases against Council of Churches Baptists was the trial of ten church members who had preached in the town of Sarkand in Almaty region on 19 May, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 26 May. After being stopped by police they were charged under part 3 of Article 375 and, at their trial in Sarkand on 22 May, were each fined 13,000 Tenge (655 Norwegian Kroner, 84 Euros, or 107 US Dollars) "for conducting missionary activity without special permission". This is just under two and a half times the average monthly salary of roughly 260 US Dollars (1,589 Norwegian Kroner, 204 Euros, or 31,535 Tenge).

In parallel with the authorities' attempts to seize property owned by members of a Hare Krishna commune near the country's commercial capital, Almaty, devotees have complained about a hostile broadcast on 25 May on the Kazakh language service of the Commercial Television of Kazakhstan (KTK) station, which is controlled by President Nursultan Nazarbayev's daughter, Dariga Nazarbaeva. Maksim Varfolomeyev, chairman of the Kazakhstan Society for Krishna Consciousness, told Forum 18 that the authorities arranged for the piece to be shown on KTK Television. "Specially-picked people said that Hare Krishna communities shouldn't be allowed in Kazakhstan," he complained. The Hare Krishna community maintains that the piece was full of lies and inaccuracies.

Dastam Shemyrbaev, chief editor of the KTK Kazakh service, who prepared the report on the Hare Krishna commune, was out of the office, but Dilya Bayramova, news coordinator at KTK, rejected the devotees' complaints on 2 June. "The report was not ordered by anyone," she told Forum 18 from Almaty on 2 June. "We never do reports to order. We report objectively sticking to facts." She insisted – basing herself on the reports shown by her television station – that the Hare Krishna residents had refused to abide by court rulings. "It's nothing to do with their faith." Asked how her station reports on events when officials have done something wrong she responded: "If officials don't do something right we report that. We're not on one side or the other."

Kazakhstan's Hare Krishna community also objects to hostile media coverage of their community's defence against attempts by police officers to bulldoze Hare Krishna houses in an Almaty suburb and seize the property (see F18News 26 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=769). The reporter in the KTK TV story alleged that the Hare Krishna community was occupying the land "illegally" and was using "excuses" to delay fulfilling court orders to hand it back. "They forcibly lure in even small children," the reporter alleged, without citing any evidence. Present, but not participating in the interview was Ryskul Zhunipayeva, the state Religious Affairs official of the administration of Karasai district, where the commune is located.

The community fears the postponed destruction and seizure of their property could go ahead at any moment. "Our position remains very precarious," Varfolomeyev told Forum 18 on 26 May. "We only managed to prevent this act of vandalism by calling in journalists, but as they explained to us, we won't be able to do that every time. The authorities have told us that, next time, they will make a surprise attack and there will be three OMON riot police officers to every Krishna devotee." At the time of the attempted demolition, Forum 18 was told that a National Security Committee (KNB) secret police officer made a similar threat of a surprise attack on the commune (see F18News 26 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=769).

Varfolomeyev also said that, after the attempt to demolish the dachas, their owners were searched by the police Financial Crimes

Squad. "This shows the authorities haven't given up trying to attack us," he insisted.

Govinda Swami, a member of the Hare Krishna community, told Forum 18 on 2 June that "the news reports are ordered by someone. Who, which office, who can say? It appears that the desired effect is to stir Kazakh sentiment against the Krishnaites. Recently, a young married Krihnaite couple I know were on a bus when a fellow passenger tried to incite the entire bus to beat them up as 'they are Kazakhs, Muslims, that have become Krishnaites, and they have stolen Kazakh land. So we should beat them.' If the government didn't incite trouble by ordering these TV interviews, I am sure these events would not take place as Kazakhs are peaceful people."

In two other recent cases in north-western Kazakhstan, a local Justice Administration has persistently refused registration to a Protestant community and a Jehovah's Witness community for no apparent reason. One leader of the Protestant community has been fined and a second is still facing prosecution (see F18News 1 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=792).

The Justice Ministry's Committee for Religious Affairs is officially responsible for the Kazakh government's religious policy. Forum 18 has made unsuccessful attempts to get the Committee to explain what this policy is, in the light of government attacks on religious minorities. Reached by Forum 18 on 25 May, Lyudmila Danilenko, head of the Department for Registering Religious Organisations in the Committee for Religious Affairs, refused to discuss the issue. Forum 18 commented that this meant that correspondents would thus be unable to report the Committee's views, but Danilenko replied that she did not trust journalists on principle. (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

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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