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KAZAKHSTAN: More limits to religious freedom planned?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Changes to Kazakhstan's Anti-terrorism Law are being planned later in 2006 by the KNB secret police, officials have told Forum 18 News Service. "These changes are not going to affect believers," a senior KNB officer, Askar Amerkhanov, told Forum 18, supported by a Justice Ministry official from the Religious Affairs Committee. Human rights activists, such as Ninel Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, as well as some religious communities are sceptical. Changes to the Religion Law are also being planned, to be presented in 2007, and it is possible that these may – despite official assurances to the contrary – ban sharing beliefs and missionary activity. "Fortunately for us, the KNB secret police sometimes let things slip, and then deny what they said. However, in our experience there have not yet been any cases where these 'slips of the tongue' have not been proved correct," Ninel Fokina told Forum 18.

Kazakhstan's National Security Committee (KNB) secret police is preparing changes to the Anti-terrorism Law, "but these changes are not going to affect believers," Askar Amerkhanov, Deputy Chief of Staff of the KNB's Anti-terrorist Centre has told Forum 18 News Service.

This, however, contradicts remarks Amerkhanov made to the news agency Kazakhstan Today on 15 September. At that time, he was reported as saying that a draft law would come before parliament before the end of 2006 and that it would tackle the so-called destructive sects and organisations, the activity of which is banned in a number of countries because they "exert a destructive influence on people's personalities," he claimed. According to Amerkhanov in September, those targeted by the draft law would include the Korean Grace Protestant church and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

This report "simply distorted my views," Amerkhanov told Forum 18 on 23 October. He went on to state that the Kazakh Supreme Court has not found the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Grace Church to be destructive organisations or terrorist groups.

Agreeing with Amerkhanov's latest comments on these religious communities, Amanbek Mukhashev, Deputy Head of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that "Neither the Jehovah's Witnesses nor the Grace Church is a destructive organisation. There are 12 international organisations that have been recognised as destructive entities – such as Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and other such organisations." Speaking to Forum 18 on 23 October, Mukhashev stated that "there are no Christian organisations on that list. Kazakhstan is a law-governed state and only the court can decide whether an organisation is a destructive sect."

Mukhashev also said that he did not know anything about preparations for changes and additions to the Anti-terrorism Law, though he admitted that in 2007 Kazakhstan's parliament will be drawing up amendments to the Religion Law. "The need to modernise the Religion Law arose long ago, but I do not think the deputies will introduce an article into the law that will ban missionary activity and proselytism," said Mukhashev.

A Protestant source who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 of suspicions that the additions to be introduced into the Religion Law will ban sharing beliefs and missionary activity in Kazakhstan.

In 2005, Kazakhstan introduced drastic legal religious freedom restrictions in "extremism" and "national security" legal changes (see the F18News religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701).

The assurances of the KNB's Amerkhanov were greeted with scepticism by the head of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, Ninel Fokina. "We know who to believe!" she told Forum 18 on 23 October. "Fortunately for us, the KNB secret police sometimes let things slip, and then deny what they said. However, in our experience there have not yet been any cases where these 'slips of the tongue' have not been proved correct. We will not find out what the KNB has thought up until its amendments to the "anti-terrorism" law reach parliament," she said.

Aleksandr Klyushev, chairman of the Association of Religious Organisations, told Forum 18 that he was "very anxious" about the proposed additions to the Anti-terrorism Law. "Clearly, the proposed amendments will put Protestant churches in a very difficult position," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 20 October.

"We have heard about Amerkhanov's statement, and of course it has made us very concerned. However, at least so far, we do not have any problems with the authorities," Fedor Zhitnikov, head of the Jehovah's Witness community in Kazakhstan, told Forum 18.

Overall, it seems clear that the situation of the Protestant religious minority, along with other religious minorities, is deteriorating (see F18News 8 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=839). Franz Tiessen, head of the Kazakh Baptist Union, told Forum 18 that not only Council of Churches Baptist congregations, who refuse on principle to register with the state in former Soviet states, but also some member congregations of his Union face fines after being unable to get local registration (see F18News 9 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=797).

"Officials keep saying they want us to register our congregations, but in some places officials just drag their feet," Tiessen told Forum 18 on 16 October. "Some have been waiting for half a year or more. We're not against registration." He said this was a particular problem for small congregations, especially in southern regions, including Jambyl [Zhambyl] and Chimkent [Shymkent] regions. He said that "about four or five" church members have each been fined about 13,000 or 20,000 Tenge (680 or 1,000 Norwegian Kroner, 80 or 125 Euros, or 100 or 150 US Dollars) in 2006, because their congregations were functioning without registration. Average monthly salaries have been estimated to be roughly equivalent to 31,500 Tenge (1,600 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros, or 260 US Dollars).

Zhambyl, Chimkent and Atyrau regions are blackspots for registering Protestant churches, a Protestant pastor who preferred not to be named told Forum 18. He said one Pentecostal church in Chimkent finally got registration as a branch of a church in Almaty in spring 2006, two and a half years after first applying. "If they see the pastor has a Kazakh name there are always problems," he told Forum 18 (see F18News 14 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=812).

The pastor described the pressure on Protestants especially in these regions as "persecution". "Those who adopt Christianity are under strong pressure, both from relatives and from officials," he said. (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 survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806 and a survey of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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