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KAZAKHSTAN: Punished for preaching in mosques

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Members of the Tabligh Jama'at international Islamic missionary organisation face increased fines across Kazakhstan for trying to give lectures in mosques without state registration, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Provisions in Kazakh law punish "missionary activity" without special permission. Also punishable is any activity by religious communities that do not have registration, with Baptists and other Protestants so far bearing the brunt of such fines. Secret police official Askar Amerkhanov denied to Forum 18 that the Kazakh authorities now regard Tabligh as extremist: "Tabligh's problem is that its supporters are preaching without having registered with the authorities." Tabligh supporter Murad Mynbaev told Forum 18 in Almaty that the group does not attribute its problems to the central Kazakh authorities but to local authorities "who in their ignorance think we are a political organisation".

As pressure increases on members of the international Islamic missionary organisation Tabligh Jama'at across Kazakhstan, government officials have denied to Forum 18 News Service that they regard the group as "extremist" but say members have been punished for acting without state registration. Tabligh members have been prosecuted and given heavy fines this year, with some foreign missionaries being expelled.

The deputy head of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, Kairat Tulesov, said he does not believe Tabligh is an extremist religious organisation. "The problem is that Tabligh is breaking the law by preaching without first having registered," he told Forum 18 from the capital Astana on 13 November. "Tabligh supporters simply have to observe Kazakh law and then they can pursue their activities without hindrance."

Askar Amerkhanov, the head of the National Security Committee secret police's Anti-terrorism Centre, takes a similar view. "It is true that at first we did have suspicions that Tabligh was an extremist organisation," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 13 November. "But having studied its teachings we have concluded that it is simply an Islamic missionary organisation. Tabligh's problem is that its supporters are preaching without having registered with the authorities."

Strangely, Kazakh Tabligh supporters do not tend to complain about the authorities. "It is true that there have been cases where fines have been imposed on our comrades in various parts of the country," Murad Mynbaev, principal of the Astana Kazakh-Malaysian Islamic University, told Forum 18 in Almaty on 7 November. "But we do not believe this is deliberate state policy. Rather, these are initiatives by the local authorities, who in their ignorance think we are a political organisation. We emphatically do not get involved in politics and it is not part of our tradition to criticise the authorities."

One Tabligh supporter, who preferred not to be named, argues that the pressure from the authorities is simply playing into the hands of his organisation's members. "If the police, or the law enforcement agencies, did not arrest us, they would never know anything about our views," he told Forum 18 in Almaty. "Now we have a unique opportunity to promote our views among staff at the law enforcement agencies."

In recent years, Kazakhstan has stepped up controls on all religious activity. In February 2005, Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, signed "extremism" legal amendments, which restricted religious freedom. In July 2005, President Nazarbayev signed "national security" legal amendments, which placed further substantial limitations on religious freedom. Under the "national security" amendments, unregistered religious organisations are banned in Kazakhstan and missionaries have to register with the local authorities (see the F18News Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701).

Baptists and other Protestant Christians are so far bearing the main brunt of fines for unregistered religious activity (see eg. F18News 2 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=848). Missionary activity by local and foreign citizens without permission is subject to administrative fines, with expulsion for foreigners. The authorities have also engaged in extra-legal harassment of religious communities, such as a Hare Krishna commune near the country's commercial centre, Almaty (see F18News 8 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=839).

Some fear that additions being planned by the KNB secret police to the Religion Law will go further and will ban sharing beliefs, as well as all missionary activity (see F18News 24 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=859).

According to a Kazinform news agency report of 8 November, pressure on members of Tabligh Jama'at continues in South Kazakhstan, Jambul [Zhambyl] and Shymkent regions. In September the Public Prosecutor for Aktau, the administrative centre of Mangistau region in western Kazakhstan, brought administrative proceedings against Tabligh members, the Russian news agency Interfax reported. The investigation found that 11 residents of the towns of Almaty, Aktobe [Aqtobe] and Atyrau and of the Russian Federation had visited a mosque in the village of Kyzyl-Tobe and promoted the movement's views among the local population. In cases brought by the Public Prosecutor's Office, five Kazakh citizens have already been found guilty of breaking the Code of Administrative Offences at a special administrative court, and were each fined 51,500 Tenge (2,570 Norwegian Kroner, 314 Euros or 402 US dollars).

In October, staff at the Department for Combating Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism at the local Interior Ministry office in Aktobe region of western Kazakhstan arrested seven people at the regional central mosque under suspicion of belonging to the Tabligh group. During preliminary questioning the detainees admitted that they had gone to the region to "call people to religious order within 40 days", the police reported. The group planned to visit Aktobe, West Kazakhstan, Atyrau and Mangistau regions (which together make up all of western Kazakhstan).

In October law enforcement agencies arrested six members of Tabligh Jamaat in Ekibastuz in Pavlodar region of north-western Kazakhstan for trying to deliver a theological lecture at the local mosque. One of those arrested was a resident of Pavlodar region, while the others had come to Ekibastuz from the Almaty and East Kazakhstan regions. "The head of the group of detainees did not try to conceal his sympathies for the Tabligh Jama'at movement and spoke openly about the religious views he was promoting," prosecutors told the Interfax news agency. They said the leader was found guilty under Administrative Code Article 375, which punishes breaking the law on religious organisations.

In June officials from the Department for Combating Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism at the local Interior Ministry office in Petropavlovsk [Petropavl] in northern Kazakhstan arrested seven Tabligh supporters who were delivering theological lectures in one of the town's mosques. The seven were found to have religious literature, including some in Arabic. The police collected evidence against the Tabligh supporters and passed it to the court, on the basis of which they were held to administrative account and each fined 51,500 tenge. The Petropavlovsk police press office told Interfax that the group's activity is now under special police surveillance. At the same time, the police noted that it is impossible to expel the Tabligh supporters from the region because they are Kazakh citizens.

Radio Liberty reported in the summer that a court in Karaganda [Qaraghandy] in central Kazakhstan found four Kyrgyz citizens who were Tabligh members guilty of promoting religious extremism. The Kazakh authorities deported the four.

Kazakhstan's deputy mufti, Muhamad-Hussein Alsabekov, says that the state-backed Spiritual Administration of Muslims (the Muftiate) takes a "neutral stance" on Tabligh. "Members of this movement have not appealed to us and so we have no contact with them," he told Forum 18 in Almaty on 8 November. "We have too little information about this organisation to draw any conclusions."

The Tabligh Jama'at movement (literally, a society for spreading faith) was founded in the 1920s in the Mewat region of India not far from Delhi. Tabligh members firmly distance themselves from politics and see their mission as promoting the ideas of Islam among Muslims. Although in some countries people who were involved with Tabligh activities have become involved in terrorism, most commentators believe that the movement itself rejects violence.

As well as in Kazakhstan, Tabligh is also relatively active in the other Central Asian republics, where it has often attracted official concern. Governments across the region try to maintain control of Islam through state-approved Muslim Boards and try to restrict or suppress independent Muslim activity outside the framework of these boards (see F18News 16 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=253).

In 2004, ten Tabligh members were sentenced to prison terms in Uzbekistan after President Islam Karimov listed the group among "extremist organisations" (see F18News 3 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=468).

Shamsybek Zakirov, adviser to the head of the Kyrgyz government's Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 that the movement is "very active" in southern Kyrgyzstan. He said many Kyrgyz citizens have received training at Tabligh's Pakistan headquarters and are now actively engaged in missionary work in Kyrgyzstan. "All Tabligh supporters must by law obtain permission to work as missionaries from the Muftiate's Propaganda Department, but in practice many of them ignore that rule," Zakirov told Forum 18 in Osh in September. "However, so far we have not taken any action against these offenders. The most we can do is advise them to obtain a licence for missionary activity from the Muftiate."

Tabligh is not so active in Tajikistan. "There are very few Tabligh members in our country and they maintain a very low level of activity," the head of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, Muhiddin Kabiri, told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 13 November. "The authorities are quite suspicious of their activity and try to keep them under control." However, he said he had not received any complaints from Tabligh supporters.

Tabligh is not reported to have been involved in Turkmenistan, a highly isolationist state which is - after Uzbekistan - the most restrictive and repressive of all the former Soviet republics. (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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