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KAZAKHSTAN: Expelled for "missionary activity without registration"

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Shortly after speaking as an official guest at an event marking Kazakhstan's "Day of Spiritual Unity and Conciliation," a South Korean Pastor has been expelled for "missionary work without registration," Forum 18 News Service has been told. Pastor Kim U Sob has led the Love Presbyterian Church in the southern town of Kyzyl-Orda for the past eight years, and was visiting a church member. "The police suddenly burst into the house where he was staying and filmed everyone present," a church member who wished to remain unnamed told Forum 18. "The situation for believers' rights in Kazakhstan is starting to resemble the 1930s. Recently the police were literally on the pastor's heels." Pastor Kim was convicted of "missionary work without registration," and subsequently refused an extension to his visa, forcing him to leave the country. Kazakh law professor Roman Podoprigora told Forum 18 that "Kim U Sob has become a victim of the view typically taken by officials."

South Korean pastor Kim U Sob, who has led the Love Presbyterian Church in the southern Kazakh town of Kyzyl-Orda [Qyzylorda] for the past eight years, has been forced to leave the country, Aleksandr Klyushev of the Association of Religious Communities of Kazakhstan told Forum 18 News Service. The local Migration Police refused to allow the pastor to extend his visa and remain in the country, after he was found guilty in June of carrying out "missionary work without registration." Pastor Kim was accredited to carry out missionary work in the town of Kyzyl-Orda, but not in the wider region. "We accompanied the pastor to the aeroplane today," a church member who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 from Kyzyl-Orda on 14 November.

The head of the Migration Police for Kyzyl-Orda region, Amyrbek Shaimagbetov, told Forum 18 that "with all the good will in the world" it could not extend Kim U Sob's visa. "Under Kazakh law a foreigner has to give a valid reason for an extended stay in Kazakhstan," he told Forum 18 on 14 November from Kyzyl-Orda. "The town akimat [administration] refused Kim U Sob his missionary accreditation."

Ibadullo Kuttykhojayev, deputy head of the Kyzyl-Orda Town Administration, admitted to Forum 18 that it had refused Pastor Kim's registration. "By law, we have to ask the law enforcement agencies about him before we can give a missionary registration," he told Forum 18 from Kyzyl-Orda on 14 November. "The answer came back from the Internal Affairs Administration for Kyzyl-Orda region that Kim U Sob had committed an administrative offence, after engaging in missionary activity without registration. Therefore we had to refuse him an extension to his missionary accreditation."

Oddly, in view of the accusations against him, Pastor Kim was among Kyzyl-Orda's religious leaders invited to speak at an official event in a cultural centre, on 18 October, to mark the Day of Spiritual Unity and Conciliation. This marks a 1992 Kazakh official "First Congress of Spiritual Accord," and is a day officially claimed to celebrate the "full rights" achieved by "religious people and communities," and the official claim that "Kazakhstan is one of the first countries which managed to transform the idea of spiritual accord into reality." A report of the event remains on the Kyzyl-Orda regional administration website. The accusations against and conviction of Pastor Kim violate international human rights standards.

Pastor Kim was accused of illegal missionary activity after police raided the home of a church member he was visiting in Kyzyl-Orda region, outside the town itself. "He did not even suspecting that friendly socialising might be classed as missionary activity," one church member told Forum 18. "However, the police suddenly burst into the house where he was staying and filmed everyone present. The situation for believers' rights in Kazakhstan is starting to resemble the 1930s. Recently the police were literally on the pastor's heels."

Klyushev reported that Kim was found guilty in June of carrying out missionary work in the region without registration. He was then fined approximately 20,000 Tenge (1,006 Norwegian Kroner, 122 Euros or 156 US Dollars).

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.

Professor Roman Podoprigora, who specialises in Kazakh law as it affects religion, notes that the issue of whether registration is obligatory or not is disputed. "On the one hand, under the amendments to the law on national security only followers of religions which are not registered in Kazakhstan are regarded as missionaries. On the other, missionaries seeking registration have to provide an invitation from a religious organisation which is registered in Kazakhstan," he told Forum 18 from Almaty. "So there is a fundamental contradiction in these amendments."

Podoprigora said that in practice officials generally regard all foreign clergy who come to Kazakhstan to preach as missionaries, even if they are representatives of religious faiths that are registered in the country. "Kim U Sob has become a victim of the view typically taken by officials," he commented to Forum 18.

Further restrictions on religious freedom, through changes to Kazakhstan's Anti-terrorism Law, are being planned for later in 2006 by the KNB secret police (see 24 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=859).

In recent months, Protestants have told Forum 18 that they face increasing restrictions on their activity especially in southern and western parts of Kazakhstan (see eg. F18News 2 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=848 and 24 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=859).

Foreign Christian preachers are not alone in facing difficulties. In a growing number of cases, members of the Muslim international missionary organisation Tabligh Jama'at have been prosecuted under the Code of Administrative Offences and at least four who were foreign citizens have been expelled from the country (see F18News 14 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=868).

Members of the country's Hare Krishna community also face ongoing attacks on their religious freedom by the government (see F18News 8 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=839). (END)

For a personal commentary on how attacking religious freedom damages national security in Kazakhstan, see eg. 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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