

12 September 2007

KAZAKHSTAN: Treason charges against Grace Church leaders?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Four members of the Grace Presbyterian Church – including its leader Igor Kim - are being investigated on treason charges which the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police have refused to explain to Forum 18 News Service. KNB officers in Karaganda told Forum 18 that the cases are being handled from the capital Astana, but no-one at the national KNB would talk to Forum 18. Church members are still being summoned for questioning. Pastor Vyacheslav Vorobyov of the church in Karaganda told Forum 18 that 12 church members began a hunger strike on 7 September to protest against the raids and investigations. He said the tax authorities are checking up on many of their 250 congregations across Kazakhstan, while computers and documents confiscated in 24 August raids have not been returned. Amanbek Mukhashev of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee refused to answer Forum 18's questions by telephone. Kazakhstan's Human Rights Ombudsperson Bolat Baikadamov told Forum 18 that he has asked the KNB about the case.

Members of the Grace Presbyterian Church in the north-eastern town of Karaganda [Qaraghandy] are still being summoned individually by the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police and asked questions about "all possible aspects" of the church's activities, Pastor Vyacheslav Vorobyov told Forum 18 News Service from Karaganda on 9 September. He added that 12 church members began a hunger strike on 7 September to protest against the raids and investigations launched by the KNB. Four members of the Grace Church are being investigated on charges of high treason - the senior pastor Igor Kim, his sister, and the church administrator, all from Karaganda, as well as the senior pastor of the church in the eastern town of Oskemen (Ust-Kamenogorsk), Aleksei Kim. Church members deny that the four have committed treason but fear that the KNB is preparing criminal cases against them.

Article 165 of Kazakhstan's Criminal Code punishes high treason. Sentences under this Article are generally of between ten and fifteen years' imprisonment. Treason is a charge which has been used in another context against religious minorities. The Kazakh Justice Ministry has issued a document stating that "transferring to other religious faiths represents treason to one's country and faith" (see F18News 3 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=939).

Although both the Karaganda and the Oskemen churches have been able to continue to meet for worship, Grace Church members told Forum 18 that continuing uncertainty over what the KNB is planning to do is putting a lot of pressure on the church and its activities.

Vorobyov also complained that the tax authorities are now checking all the documents of many of their 250 affiliated congregations in Kazakhstan. He added that though church leaders appealed for the return of property confiscated during raids in Karaganda and Oskemen on 24 August, the authorities would not accept their appeals. Since they were stripped of their computers, Vorobyov said, they were "virtually out of touch with the outside world". They could not easily communicate through the internet or update the church website <http://www.grace.church.kz>.

Pastor Vorobyov also told Forum 18 that the branch of the KNB in Oskemen had earlier called the Karaganda church to ask about the whereabouts of Pastor Aleksei Kim, the Oskemen church's senior pastor. Kim was in Karaganda being ordained for the ministry at the time.

The church's problems began on 24 August, when the KNB staged raids on the churches in Karaganda and Oskemen, as well as on church-owned private homes in Karaganda. The raid on the Karaganda church itself – which was led by KNB officers from the capital Astana - lasted 15 hours (see F18News 28 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1011).

Forum 18's repeated attempts between 27 August and 11 September to find out from the KNB in the capital Astana, Karaganda and Oskemen why the churches have been subjected to confiscations of computers and documents and church members interrogated were unsuccessful. On 10 September, Gani Bakizov, who presented himself as the chief of the secretariat of the KNB's Karaganda branch, kept promising to connect the officer leading the investigation to Forum 18 to answer questions but never did. Other KNB officers in Karaganda told Forum 18 that the cases are being handled from Astana. No-one at the national KNB in the capital would talk to Forum 18.

Kazakhstan's Human Rights Ombudsperson Bolat Baikadamov told Forum 18 from Astana on 12 September that he had asked the KNB about the case, but they told him to send a written inquiry. He told Forum 18 that the KNB would take at least ten days to respond.

Mirzabek Mukhamedov, the head of the Oskemen town administration's Department for Relations with Religious Organisations, confirmed to Forum 18 on 12 September that the Grace church in the town is legally registered and said there should be no problems in this regard. He said he would look into why the KNB is conducting such a serious investigation.

Forum 18 tried to talk to Amanbek Mukhashev, deputy head of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, on 11 and 12 September. Both times he declined to answer any questions, insisting that he was not going to respond by phone. "Send us a fax and we will think about answering you," he told Forum 18.

The Grace Church began in Karaganda in April 1991 under the leadership of Pastor Joseph Yu, a US missionary of Korean background. It now claims some 3,000 members in the Karaganda church and a further 10,000 in its 250 daughter churches across Kazakhstan. Pastor Yu rejects any suggestion that church members in Kazakhstan could have been involved in treason. "They say we are spies, but this is not true," he told Forum 18 on 30 August from the South Korean capital Seoul. "We have maintained very good relations with the authorities in the seventeen years we have been operating. We've done much good and helped the poor."

Although Pastor Yu still oversees the church in Kazakhstan and elsewhere in the region, he was deported from Russia in August 2002 (see F18News 7 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=644). He was barred from entering Kazakhstan in May 2005, he told Forum 18. He said no reason was given.

Forum 18 knows of a number of Protestants, Muslims and a Buddhist who have been denied visas to visit Kazakhstan for religious purposes in recent years. Such entry denials often follow entry denial to Russia, which still shares its entry blacklist with Kazakhstan and a number of other former Soviet republics (see F18News 8 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=578).

Late last year Dan Ballast, a US citizen, was fined and ordered deported from Kazakhstan after taking part in the activity of the Spring of Water Baptist church in Oskemen. The deportation order was subsequently withdrawn but Ballast left Kazakhstan in November 2006. Law-enforcement officials had secretly attended a youth service at the church to spy on its activity (see F18News 12 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=886). (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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