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KAZAKHSTAN: Secret police operation to close down entire denomination?

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The KNB secret police subjected the Grace Presbyterian Church in Almaty to a 17-hour raid on 25 and 26 January. "They checked everybody and everything and confiscated all the computer hardware," Dmitri Kan of the church's headquarters in Karaganda told Forum 18 News Service. The raid is part of the campaign begun with a 15-hour raid in Karaganda last August. The Financial Police, Justice Department, and KNB have stepped up investigating and questioning Grace Church members across Kazakhstan since mid-January, he added. Leaks through the media allege that church members are engaged in spying, appropriating church members' property, failing to file financial information, inciting inter-religious enmity and holding illegal drugs, even though no-one has ever been brought before a criminal court. "All these efforts are done to close down the entire Grace Church in Kazakhstan," Kan told Forum 18. The Karaganda Regional Department of the KNB told Forum 18 that the operation against the Church is being led by the central KNB in the capital Astana. Vyacheslav Kalyuzhny, the Deputy Human Rights Ombudsperson, says the Church has not complained to his office. "People are not persecuted on religious grounds in Kazakhstan," he claimed.

The embattled Grace Presbyterian Church is facing renewed raids, interrogations and what church members complain are targeted smears through the media. Church members told Forum 18 News Service that their church in Almaty, Kazakhstan's commercial capital, faced a massive raid which began at noon on 25 January and went on until 5 o'clock the following morning. "They checked everybody and everything and confiscated all the computer hardware," Dmitri Kan of the church's headquarters in the north-eastern town of Karaganda [Qaraghandy] told Forum 18 on 29 January. "Our Church is now being scrutinised by state agencies such as the Financial Police, Justice Department, and National Security all over Kazakhstan."

The raid on the Almaty Grace Church took place on a warrant issued by the Almaty city Public Prosecutor. The raid was conducted by officers of the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police. Kan told Forum 18 that KNB and Prosecutor's Office officials from Karaganda 1,100 kms (680 miles) away took part in the Almaty raid.

The church building is located on one of Almaty's central streets. Kan says the congregation in the city has about 5,000 members. Across Kazakhstan the Church has some 300 congregations. Despite the repeated raids, Grace congregations continue to meet for worship.

Amanbek Mukhashev, deputy head of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, appeared to show little interest in the Grace Church's concerns. "I have not heard that the Grace Church is being persecuted all over Kazakhstan," he told Forum 18 from the capital Astana on 29 January. Reminded that church members have contacted him to report harassment, including the deliberate planting of drugs in their church buildings, he responded: "That's why the police and different government agencies are looking into the matter." And he added: "I am sure the Financial Police would not just do a check-up for nothing. They must have violated something."

Despite the harassment of the Grace Church and other religious communities – including Baptist congregations which refuse to seek state registration, the Hare Krishna commune near Almaty, and Protestant and Jehovah's Witness communities which have been refused state registration – Mukhashev denied such official harassment. "We don't have any persecution on religious grounds in Kazakhstan," he claimed to Forum 18. "If we find out that a religious community was not dealt with fairly we correct the misdeeds of the officials."

Vyacheslav Kalyuzhny, the Deputy Human Rights Ombudsperson, was equally unconcerned. "We are not authorised to give any comments on allegations that the Grace Church is being persecuted all over Kazakhstan," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 29 February. He said his office had not received any complaints from the Grace Church so cannot act on its behalf. But he insisted that Kazakhstan's religious believers do not face any problems. "People are not persecuted on religious grounds in Kazakhstan. For example, many Kazakhs have adopted the Christian faith but are not persecuted for it. There is a tolerant attitude toward different confessions."

Shaymurat Otarbaev, head of the Karaganda Regional Department of the KNB, confirmed that the operation against the Grace

Church is being led by the central KNB in the capital Astana. "We are not involved in the investigation, the central organ from Astana is," he told Forum 18 on 29 January. "Probably the Grace Church has violated some laws."

No-one at the central KNB in Astana would comment to Forum 18 on 30 January about why Grace Church congregations across Kazakhstan have been subjected to months of investigation, protracted raids and leaks through the media that they are allegedly engaged in spying, appropriating church members' property, failing to file financial information, inciting inter-religious enmity and holding illegal drugs.

Despite reports that the Financial Police has been involved in raids on Grace congregations, Abtarali Bulebay, of the headquarters of the Financial Police in Astana, denied this. "We are not involved in any check-ups," he told Forum 18 on 29 January. "I just read in a newspaper article today that it's a question of espionage by the church. You should talk to the KNB - they are doing the check-up. The Financial Police is not involved at all."

However, Professor Roman Podoprigora of the Caspian Public University in Almaty – a specialist on religion and law - notes that the Financial Police are involved in overseeing the finances of all Kazakhstan's religious communities. "In developed democracies religious organisations are exempt from taxes - funds given to them are considered as charitable donations and are not taxed," he explained to Forum 18 on 29 January. "But not here. In Kazakhstan things are different. Religious communities are made to file reports on their income to the tax authorities."

Kan of the Karaganda Church complained that state agencies are putting a lot of pressure on church members and ministers across the country. "Over the last week our church members were summoned by the various state agencies to be questioned," he told Forum 18. "In Kyzyl-Orda Pastor Valentin Khigai was punished administratively. In Almaty the pastor's wife, Arina Kim, is being prosecuted for allegedly not filing an income statement. The Rector of the Grace Church Bible seminary, Olga Naydenova, was punished administratively for organising religious education without a proper licence." He added that in Taldy-Kurgan [Taldyqorghhan], Oskemen (Ust-Kamenogorsk) and other eastern regions, officials openly told members of local congregations that they were particularly targeting the Grace Church.

"All these efforts are done to close down the entire Grace Church in Kazakhstan," Kan told Forum 18. "This whole campaign started in August of last year and is still going on."

In August 2007 a massive 15-hour raid was staged on the Grace Church headquarters in Karaganda and on congregations in other cities. The raids were followed by investigations and questioning of church members by various state agencies (see F18News 28 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1026). Ever since the August raid, local and Russian news agencies have repeatedly run articles citing prosecutors and KNB officials making varying allegations against church members even though no criminal case has ever reached court.

The most recent media smears came on 29 January in a Russian-language article by Askar Jaldinov on the liter.kz website and a shorter article in Kazakh on the associated website aikyn.kz by Aidyn Oljaev. Jaldinov's article was entitled "Deceptive 'Grace': Under cover of the church foreign spies were working". Although the journalist specifies that the investigation is still underway, many of the statements imply that church members' are guilty of spying, holding drugs and stealing church members' property. He speaks of "spies in cassocks".

"The investigation contends that the activity of which the clergy of the Karaganda Grace Church are accused is not a private instance but the general mode of behaviour of this cult group in Kazakhstan." Despite noting that the KNB was refusing to discuss the case, Jaldinov alleged that during the raid the KNB gathered "much proof that in [Almaty] they were engaged not in missionary activity. Rather, it was intelligence activity." He said it was not yet known which country church members had been spying for.

Reached on 30 January, Jaldinov insisted that his article was fair and was not designed to imply that church members are guilty without a trial. "I don't say they are spies but that the authorities accuse them of that," he told Forum 18. However, he appeared to believe the accusations. "If the authorities take measures there must be some reasons. I report what I see and hear – let readers make up their own mind." He admitted that he had not tried to talk to Grace Church members, but insisted his investigations had only just begun. "Of course I will talk to church members." Although he admitted that he had been alerted to the case by his "confidential sources" he denied that these were officials.

The articles came after remarks by President Nursultan Nazarbaev at a meeting of his Nur Otan party on 17 January – widely reported by the media – that measures were needed to halt the activity of "illegal religious movements" in Kazakhstan. Nazarbaev particularly criticised missionaries.

Among other religious minority communities targeted in hostile media coverage reporting unsubstantiated accusations as fact is the embattled Hare Krishna commune near Almaty (see F18News 2 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793).

Despite the raids, investigations, threats and media smears, Kan stressed that the Grace Church is responding calmly. "I am officially declaring that we have not submitted any complaint to any of the authorities," he told Forum 18.

He pointed out that on 24 August last year, the press-secretary of the prosecutor general publicly announced that the authority had allegedly found psychotropic substances in the Grace Church premises, that church members were involved in swindling money, and that the church was inciting interethnic dissension. "We just called the religious affairs department and talked to Amanbek Mukhashev and said that these things were not true and none of this had ever taken place. We have never complained but on the contrary have been praying unceasingly ever since."

One source told Forum 18 that the Kazakh authorities believe the Karaganda Grace church's founder, Joseph Yu, was a spy. Yu, an American citizen of South Korean origin who now lives in Seoul, founded the church in 1991. Although Pastor Yu still oversees the church in Kazakhstan and elsewhere in the region, he was deported from Russia in August 2002. He was barred from entering Kazakhstan in May 2005, he told Forum 18. He said no reason was given (see F18News 12 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1016). Church members want Pastor Yu to be allowed to return to visit the congregation, the source said.

The source told Forum 18 that many in the church believe that a church employee who was sacked from his job in the early 2000s had been placed there as an agent by the KNB. The man died of cancer in September 2007 two weeks after a massive raid on the church and members of his family reportedly blamed the church at his funeral for allegedly hastening his death.

One source told Forum 18 that the planting of agents in religious congregations "does happen" and the KNB "do try to recruit members of religious communities as spies".

In 2006 Dan Ballast, an American working as a university lecturer in Oskemen, was issued with a deportation order after spies in the local Baptist church he attended told the authorities that he participated in a Bible discussion (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

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kazakhstan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=29>.

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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