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KAZAKHSTAN: Revival of state hostility to religious organisations fuels intrusive check-ups?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

The KNB secret police, the Interior Ministry and the Prosecutor's Office appear to have stepped up their intrusive check-ups on religious communities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Fourteen Protestant churches and one Hare Krishna community have faced heavy-handed check-ups in January and February in the country's commercial capital Almaty alone. The Protestant Alpha and Omega Centre faced a two-day check which followed slanderous coverage of the Centre on television. "They checked sanitary-hygiene conditions, fire-prevention measures, and all the documents," the Centre's director Leonid Zavyanov told Forum 18. "What's the worry, it's just a check-up, and we have found nothing serious yet," the Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18. Although Muslims and the Russian Orthodox deny that their communities are being checked up, a Religious Affairs Committee official told Forum 18 that such check-ups have led to mosques being closed down and muftis sacked. Human rights activist Yevgeny Zhovtis sees the check-ups as part of a revival of state hostility to religious organisations.

Several religious minority communities have complained to Forum 18 News Service of intrusive check-ups by a variety of state agencies in recent months. Fourteen Protestant churches and one Hare Krishna community have faced heavy-handed check-ups in January and February in the country's commercial capital Almaty alone. Human rights activist Yevgeny Zhovtis told Forum 18 that he sees this as part of what he detects as a revival of hostility towards religious organisations in the government and state agencies. "The general tendency now is that the authorities want to establish firm control of religious organisations at the local level of Akimats [administrations], Departments of the Prosecutor's Office and local KNB offices," he told Forum 18 from Almaty on 12 February. He and other human rights activists complain that no clear mechanisms exist for bona-fide check-ups of religious organisations and say that sometimes check-ups may be conducted merely at someone's political command.

In early February in Turksib district of Almaty city alone, as many as 13 Protestant religious organisations were being simultaneously checked by police, National Security Committee (KNB) secret police and other agencies, a human rights activist from Almaty told Forum 18 on 6 February.

In late January the KNB visited Almaty's Hare Krishna community, Viktor Golous, the Chairman of the community, told Forum 18 from the city on 7 February. The two officers, who gave their first names only as Shukhrat and Ulan, asked community members to prepare the documents and lists of people working for the community for their next visit. On 31 January the local policeman, who introduced himself as Oleg Germanovich, arrived asking for the charter and the list of people working for them. He told them he was acting on an order from the Interior Minister. The community leaders asked him to show them written permission. The police officer promised that he would return soon with the written permission but has not yet done so.

On 5 and 6 February the Prosecutor's Office of Almaty's Bostandyk District conducted a check-up of the Alpha and Omega Centre for Spiritual Life, a Christian organisation registered officially in 1998. The check-up followed slanderous coverage of the Centre on Astana TV on 2 February. Leonid Zavyanov, the Centre's director, told Forum 18 that he was presented with a decision of the Prosecutor Almat Bayshulakov authorising the check-up which would start on 5 February and go on for one month. He was told that it is a part of routine check-ups every three or four years by the Prosecutor's Office. "They checked sanitary-hygiene conditions, fire-prevention measures, and all the documents," Zavyanov told Forum 18 on 6 February.

He said he suspected that the check-up might be one repercussion of the call from President Nursultan Nazarbayev in January 2008 and the Justice Minister Zagipa Baliyeva in December 2007 to severely restrict missionary activity. A State Programme, which strengthens government supervision of religious activity both on a national and local level, was also approved in December (see F18News 5 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1081).

Forum 18 tried to reach Prosecutor Bayshulakov on 6 February to ask about the check-up of the Alpha and Omega Centre. The man who answered the phone, who would not identify himself, confirmed the check-up, but refused to say why it was taking place. "What's the worry, it's just a check-up, and we have found nothing serious yet," he told Forum 18. He would not confirm or deny whether there existed a regulation for the Prosecutor to conduct routine check-ups of religious organisations.

Across Kazakhstan in the capital Astana, Pastor Yaroslav Senyushkevich of the Council of Churches Baptists reported that his district police office had called him in early February to make an appointment to discuss what they called his Church's "illegal" activity. "They were supposed to come and see me two days ago but have not visited yet," he told Forum 18 on 6 February. Council of Churches Baptists refuse state registration on principle, and face growing fines for holding unregistered worship (see F18News 11 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=954).

Also facing massive raids and close scrutiny from the KNB and other state agencies have been the congregations of the Grace Presbyterian church (see F18News on 30 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1078).

State officials admitted to Forum 18 that they check up on religious organisations but deny that these check-ups are heavy-handed.

Lyudmila Danilenko of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee in Astana denied that the check-ups, including those on the Grace Church and the Alpha and Omega Centre, were excessive. "The Grace Church has been charged with crimes, and an investigation is under way," she told Forum 18 on 11 February. "But there's nothing so serious about the check-up of Alpha and Omega, otherwise they would be knocking on the doors of the Committee, which has not happened yet." Danilenko insisted that her Committee was not biased against minority faiths. "We have even closed down mosques and sacked muftis in the past when we discovered misuse of finances or other violations," she said. She refused to specify which mosques were closed down and when.

Also insisting that all religious organisations are equal before the Constitution is Sholpan Abdyreeva, Advisor to the Minister of Justice. "If religious organisations are checked up then all of them are being checked up," she told Forum 18 from Astana on 11 February.

Murat Murtazin, the Senior Aide to the General Prosecutor of Kazakhstan, said that as regards check-ups, there are no privileged organisations for the Prosecutor's Office. "Everyone is equal before the law, no matter whether they are the so-called minority faiths or the traditional religious organisations," he told Forum 18 on 12 February. He refused to say whether he believed the current check-ups of religious communities are excessive.

Kazakhstan's two biggest religious communities deny that they face check-ups. Muhammadhusein Assalbekov, the deputy mufti of Almaty, said that none of the mosques under the Muftiate were being checked. "The authorities would not interfere with our affairs unless we seriously violated something," he told Forum 18 on 7 February. He added that he knows nothing about any periodical check-ups by the authorities.

Father Aleksandr Ievlev of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Astana and Almaty said that the Orthodox churches were not being checked up. "We abide by the laws of the country, and I don't see a reason for us to be checked up," he told Forum 18 on 7 February. "I assure you that those that are being checked up must have violated some laws. The authorities usually make check-ups on marginal groups."

However Bishop Janusz Kaleta of the Catholic Church in the western town of Atyrau told Forum 18 on 11 February that check-ups on their parishes happen now and then but it does not worry them. "They come and check us up at times but it's nothing terrible," he said.

Yet it remains unclear who initiates these check-ups and why so many agencies are involved at the same time. Danilenko of the Religious Affairs Committee said the check-ups would only be authorised and carried out by the General Prosecutor's office and were not initiated by her office. "The General Prosecutor issues an order for a check-up, and includes our specialists in the team that carries out the check-up," she told Forum 18. "We have no authority in that."

Abdyreeva of the Justice Ministry told Forum 18 that usually there are two reasons for check-ups on religious organisations, "planned measures of the General Prosecutor's Office and complaints from citizens". She could not specify which law the check-ups by the General Prosecutor's Office were based, and referred Forum18 to the General Prosecutor's Office. Murtazin of the General Prosecutor's Office refused to say on which law the check-ups are based.

However Ninel Fokina of Almaty Helsinki Committee says that the initiative to check up and gather information on religious communities comes from local branches of the Justice Ministry and local executive authorities. These check-ups then involve the Interior Ministry, KNB and the General Prosecutor's office.

Fokina pointed out that regulations do not specify how often the General Prosecutor's office can check up on civil society bodies, including religious organisations. "The usual scheme we have seen lately is that the three state agencies - the Ministry of Interior, KNB and the General Prosecutor's Office - issue warrants for the check-ups and carry them out jointly," she told Forum 18 from Almaty on 12 February.

Zhovtis, the head of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, complained that one of the main problems over laws in Kazakhstan is how they are interpreted. "The judiciary is politically engaged and is not therefore able to interpret the law independently and objectively," he told Forum 18. "The General Prosecutor's office, KNB and Interior Ministry

may use regulations and their own internal instructions to check up on organisations under the guise of controlling radicalism and terrorism."

Fokina commented that the recent pressure from different local authorities on religious communities may be the consequence of the December 2007 State Programme and the recent attack on missionaries by President Nazarbayev. "Since no clear mechanisms exist for check-ups of religious organisations it is usually done at somebody's political command," she claimed. "Local administrations and state agencies may be competing to show their loyalty to the President as a way of responding to his recent remarks."

In addition to the check-ups, religious communities in different regions of Kazakhstan have also been given questionnaires containing highly intrusive questions on private matters of the life of their members (see F18News 25 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1092).

Fokina told Forum 18 that the recent check-ups have seriously affected several organisations, but some are afraid to complain or ask for help. She said that when the media or human rights organisations try to investigate the check-ups they are warned off by the law-enforcement agencies, who accuse them of interfering in the course of the investigations. (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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