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KAZAKHSTAN: Is unregistered religious activity extremism, separatism or terrorism?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Muslims and Baptists are known to have been targeted in 2010 by at least three of Kazakhstan's regional police Departments for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism in Kazakhstan, Forum 18 News Service has learned. "We get involved in questions on this line," police Major Dauren Gumarov commented on raids on three Taraz mosques and one nearby madrassa (religious college). Major Gumarov is head of Jambyl region's anti-terrorism police, and asked what he meant by "line" he replied: "Unregistered religious associations." Insisting – despite contradictory statements in Kazakh law and international human rights standards – that state registration is compulsory, Major Gumarov refused to explain why his Department targeted peaceful religious communities which did not pose an extremist, separatist or terrorist threat. Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse on principle to seek state registration – have also been targeted by anti-terrorism police. Pastor Nikolai Levin told Forum 18 that he "asked [a police officer] why people cannot believe as they choose without his Department needing to know about it, but he refused to explain".

At least three different regional police Departments for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism in Kazakhstan have raided religious communities in 2010, solely because they engage in unregistered religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Known targets have been congregations of the Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse on principle to seek state registration from the authorities – in both Akmola Region (around the capital Astana) and North Kazakhstan Region, as well as unregistered mosques in Taraz in the southern Jambyl [Zhambyl] Region.

"We get involved in questions on this line," police Major Dauren Gumarov commented on raids on three Taraz mosques and one nearby madrassa (religious college), and check-ups on their registration status. Major Gumarov is head of Jambyl police's regional Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism. Asked what he meant by "line", he responded: "Unregistered religious associations."

Asked why anti-terrorism police were involved merely because a religious community is functioning without registration, Major Gumarov insisted: "Registration is required. We didn't close them down – we went with the Prosecutor's Office and they warned them to get registration." He refused to explain why his Department was involved with religious communities which did not pose an extremist, separatist or terrorist threat.

Current Kazakh law contradicts itself on whether or not the registration of religious organisations is compulsory (see F18News 4 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=625).

Regional police Departments for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism, which have raided or questioned Baptists in Akmola and North Kazakhstan Regions in June, refused to discuss their activity with Forum 18.

An officer of the western Mangistau Region's police Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism was involved in raiding the New Life Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in the Caspian Sea port town of Aktau [Aqtau] in 2009. He was also involved in questioning and threatening church members, and trying to recruit one as a spy, church members told Forum 18, and attended the trial of a church member which ordered her deportation (see F18News 10 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1325).

Ordinary police and other officials also raid

Accompanying the Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism police in Taraz were Prosecutor's Office officials. Raids on unregistered religious communities are often conducted by the ordinary police and officials of Internal Policy Departments of local Akimats (administrations).

In one recent case, police in the northern Pavlodar Region raided the ordination service of a Council of Churches Baptist pastor on 19 April. Like many of their leaders across Kazakhstan, he was subsequently given a heavy fine (see F18News 24 June 2010

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1460).

"Why can't people believe as they choose"?

Akmola Region's police Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism refused to discuss why they questioned a local Council of Churches Baptist pastor. Pastor Nikolai Levin, who leads the congregation in Balkashino, told Forum 18 that twice in June he has been summoned to the Sandyktau District Police in Balkashino, where he has been questioned by an officer of the Department.

"He demanded that I register the church, which we won't agree to do," Pastor Levin told Forum 18 on 22 June. "He demanded that I hand over a list of church members. I refused saying that we don't have such lists." He said the officer refused to explain why the Department needed such lists and warned him that they would come during a service and write down the names of all those present. "I asked him why people cannot believe as they choose without his Department needing to know about it, but he refused to explain."

An officer at Sandyktau District Police – who would not give his name - told Forum 18 on 22 June that Levin was questioned because his community is not registered. "Our law says he must register." But he insisted that an officer from the police Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism had come from the regional capital Kokshetau to question him, and that the local police was not involved.

Officials at the regional Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism in Kokshetau refused to discuss why they had questioned Pastor Levin, as well as demanding a list of church members. "Our people weren't there in Balkashino," one officer – who would not give his name – claimed to Forum 18 on 22 June. Another told Forum 18 shortly afterwards that "we are not able to answer your questions at the moment".

Internal Policy Department also visit

Pastor Levin said so far the Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism have not visited the church during a service as threatened. However, he said an official of Sandyktau District Akimat (administration) Internal Policy Department came to his home on 28 May – before he was summoned by the Department - and once again asked why he would not register the church. "We've explained to them so many times," he told Forum 18.

Saule Zhailganova, head of the district Internal Policy Department, admitted that she had visited Pastor Levin. "We just went to conduct explanatory work that he must register his congregation," she told Forum 18 on 22 June. "We have no complaints about them apart from this." Told that the Baptists refuse to register – citing their religious freedom rights under Kazakhstan's Constitution and the country's international human rights obligations – and asked what officials would do when they continue to worship, Zhailganova did not state any specific measure.

Aida Sydzhanova of Sandyktau District Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 the same day that their officials have not visited Levin and "are not demanding anything of him". However, she too insisted he must register his congregation.

In January 2009, the Balkashino Baptist congregation was subjected to a raid in which the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police took part. Levin was fined the following month for leading his unregistered congregation, but refused to pay the fine. The judge also banned the congregation permanently, a ban the Baptists have ignored (see F18News 12 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1255).

Raid on worship service

Another Council of Churches Baptist congregation was raided by anti-terrorism police in North Kazakhstan Region. Pastor Aleksandr Kerker told Forum 18 on 22 June that seven officers of the regional Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism raided his congregation's evening worship service on 16 June in his home in Tayinsha. He said they tried to film the service but he told them to stop. "They wanted to halt the service and summon those present out to the street, but I refused. They then waited until the service was over."

Pastor Kerker said one of the officers sat through the rest of the service. "He had a bag with him and I don't know if he had a concealed recorder or not."

After the service the police allowed children to leave, but stopped the adults on the street and filmed them. Pastor Kerker said officers again demanded that he register the congregation, but he explained yet again that his congregation does not need state registration.

The police told him a case is being prepared against him, for leading an unregistered religious community. Pastor Kerker was fined for this in 2008 and 2009 and officials intended to confiscate property from him when he refused to pay (see F18News 9 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1238).

However, he told Forum 18 that so far none of his property has been seized to pay for these fines.

Anti-terrorism police move against unregistered mosques

Three mosques in Taraz in the southern Jambyl Region have been raided by the Regional Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism since October 2009, the Regional Police reported on their website.

First to be raided was the town's Abubekr Mosque in October 2009 in a joint raid with officials of the town Prosecutor's Office. Then on 14 January 2010 the Saly-molda Mosque was raided, followed about two weeks later by the Aisula-Ana Mosque.

In all three cases, the website noted that cases were prepared against the imams for leading unregistered religious communities under Article 375 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("refusal by leaders of religious associations to register them with state bodies, carrying out of activity by religious associations not in accordance with their statute, participating in the activity of or financing political parties, violating the rules governing holding of religious events outside the location of a religious association, organising of special children's or youth meetings not related to worship, and forcing individuals to carry out religious rituals").

The government's current re-draft of the Administrative Code continues existing punishments for exercising freedom of religion or belief, including leaving much of Article 375 intact (see F18News 24 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1460).

The Regional Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism also raided an unregistered madrassa attached to the mosque in the village of Masanchi not far from Taraz in February 2010.

While the head of the Regional Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism defended the raids to Forum 18, no-one at the Taraz Prosecutor's Office was available on 21 or 22 June to discuss them and the administrative cases prepared against the imams.

"There is no extremism in our region now"

However, Abdykarim Abdymominov, religious affairs official at Taraz Akimat, denied to Forum 18 that any of the three raided mosques in the town had been closed or that the imams had been brought to trial. "You have false information – no mosque was raided or checked up on by the anti-terrorism police," he told Forum 18 on 21 June. "We've had no complaints." Told that the Regional Police had published the information on its website, he repeated that no mosque had faced check-ups. "If they had, I'd have known."

Abdymominov insisted all religious communities have to be registered. "It's an elementary issue – the law requires it," he told Forum 18. "This is not so as to interfere in their activity – but we're close to the border with Uzbekistan, where there are Wahhabis [a frequently used term for fundamentalist Muslims] and terrorists." Asked whether any terrorist plans had been detected in Taraz's mosques, he responded "Yes". On closer questioning he indicated that this had been a problem 15 years ago. "There is no extremism in our region now."

Abdymominov said Aisula-Ana mosque is now registered, but if Saly-molda Mosque fails to get registration it will be closed down. "This is not a question of religious motives – they need to make sure they have adequate fire safety measures, for example. You can't just use a small house for prayer. If something happened, who would be responsible?"

Kanat Kuanishbekov, imam of Aisula-Ana mosque, confirmed to Forum 18 on 22 June that in the wake of the raid the community had applied for state registration. He said that the community had to wait for the Muftiate in Almaty to send the statute that all mosques use and registration was not given until 3 March. He said the administrative case against him had been halted when the mosque applied for registration.

An official of Jambyl Regional Justice Department who would not give his name told Forum 18 on 22 June that of the four raided Muslim communities, only the Aisula-Ana Mosque has since gained registration. "The other three haven't lodged applications," he added.

The Regional Police also noted on their website that 13 local religious leaders were each fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage in 2009 for leading unregistered religious communities. It did not identify them.

The mass media, the education system and official statements are often used by officials to link unregistered religious activity with terrorism and extremism (see eg. F18News 18 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1458). (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=1352.

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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