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KAZAKHSTAN: "Quite enough missionaries" in the south?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Both the South Korean-led Synbakyn Protestant church and the Ahmadi Muslim community in southern Kazakhstan have come under pressure from south Kazakh authorities recently, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Late in 2004, the authorities tried to close down the Synbakyn church's seminary, and both foreign Protestant and foreign Ahmadi Muslim missionaries have encountered visa problems. The regional local authority's chief specialist on religious affairs, Vladimir Zharinov, told Forum 18 that "all our region's authorities are trying to do is to ensure that religious associations operate in accordance with the laws of Kazakhstan." But Zharinov could not say in what precise ways religious believers were breaking the law.

South Kazakh authorities continue to pressure the local branch of the South Korean-led Synbakyn Protestant church, the director of the local sociological resources centre Serik Aidasov told Forum 18 News Service on 2 January from Shymkent, the administrative centre of South Kazakhstan region. The authorities tried to close down the church's seminary in November 2004, while a missionary from South Korea had his visa cut short in December and had to leave Kazakhstan, though he has since been able to return. Forum 18 has also learnt that a local leader of the Ahmadi Muslim community has been told that next time his visa will not be renewed and he will have to return to his native Pakistan.

The administrator of the Synbakyn church, Tatyana Kim, confirmed that Aidasov had attended all the court hearings. But she declined to comment on why she believed the church was facing such problems, telling Forum 18 from Shymkent on 7 January that the church is hoping to "find a common language" with the authorities and resolve the problems. Most members of the 100-strong Synbakyn church are local ethnic Koreans.

In November 2004, the local procuracy brought an administrative case against the church's seminary on the grounds that the seminary did not hold a state licence to provide education. However, the church's representatives managed to persuade the court that, under the religion law, there is no requirement for religious educational establishments to hold a licence to teach.

"The public prosecutor based his action on the law on education, under which educational establishments do indeed have to hold a licence from the ministry of education," Aidasov told Forum 18. "However, Kazakhstan's constitution states that the church is separate from the state, and therefore this law does not extend to religious educational establishments." He said the court referred the issue to the ministry of education and received an official reply saying that the ministry did not issue licences to religious educational establishments. "After that, the court recognised the activity of the Protestant seminary as legal," Aidasov reported.

Nevertheless, in mid-December 2004 the Visa and Registration Administration for South Kazakhstan region cancelled the visa of a South Korean missionary at the Synbakyn church. Aidasov notes that according to a Cabinet of Ministers decree, since 2003 all missionaries have had to register with the local state authorities. "The law states that registration is a matter of notification, in other words the authorities cannot refuse to register a missionary," he said. "However, the South Korean missionary was officially refused registration on the grounds that South Kazakhstan region had 'quite enough missionaries'."

The Visa and Registration Administration for South Kazakhstan gave the missionary an official warning that his visa was being cut short and that he would have to leave Kazakhstan by 13 December 2004. Church members told Forum 18 that he left by that date and returned to South Korea, but was able to gain a new visa and return to Shymkent.

Other foreign missionaries are also having problems with their visas. Said Hasan Tahir Bukhari, head of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in South Kazakhstan region and a citizen of Pakistan, told Forum 18 in Shymkent, on 2 January 2005, that the South Kazakhstan Visa and Registration Administration had warned him that he was being given a visa for the last time and that he would subsequently "have to go back to Pakistan". The Ahmadiyya community was founded in nineteenth-century India by Mirza Gulam Ahmad Kadiani and is regarded as non-Islamic by many Muslims. Ahmadi doctrine was brought to Central Asia at the beginning of the 1990s by preachers from Pakistan.

Said Hasan Tahir Bukhari believes that in the past few months the authorities' policy towards religious believers in South Kazakhstan region especially has become much harsher. "I myself have not received reports about the persecution of believers in other parts of Kazakhstan," he told Forum 18. "However, the authorities in South Kazakhstan have significantly stepped up their

policy against believers of all confessions."

These moves against the Synbakyn Church and the Ahmadi community follow the compulsory re-attestation of imams in South Kazakhstan region, which began in late November. Although local Muslim leaders denied it to Forum 18, local commentators insist the re-attestation was prompted by the authorities, not by the Muslim community (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=472). South Kazakhstan region, which borders Uzbekistan, is a distinct region of Kazakhstan with some 18 percent of its population being ethnic Uzbeks. With some justification, Kazakh officials have privately told Forum 18 that the region is the main "hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism" in the country (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=472).

However, the chief specialist on religious affairs at the department for relations with public associations at South Kazakhstan's regional administration, Vladimir Zharinov, denied that the authorities' policy towards believers had become harsher. He conceded to Forum 18 on 2 January from Shymkent that the fact that ethnic Uzbek citizens of Kazakhstan were among the suicide bombers who attacked the Uzbek capital Tashkent in July 2004 "could not but arouse our alarm. However, I wouldn't say that our policy towards believers has become harsher. All our region's authorities are trying to do is to ensure that religious associations operate in accordance with the laws of Kazakhstan." Zharinov could not say in what precise ways religious believers were breaking the law. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>

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