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KAZAKHSTAN: Why was church subjected to 15-hour raid?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Two places of worship of the Grace Presbyterian Church – in the towns of Karaganda and Oskemen – were among church-owned premises raided by the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police on 24 August, church sources told Forum 18. KNB officers came from the capital Astana to raid the large Karaganda church. Over 15 hours they searched the entire premises, prevented anyone from leaving and forced those present to write statements. Computers and documents were taken away. KNB officers in Karaganda and in Astana refused to tell Forum 18 why the churches were raided. Aleksandr Klyushev of the Association of Religious Communities of Kazakhstan told Forum 18 that the head of the church, Archbishop Igor Kim, his sister and the administrator are being investigated for treason. But Klyushev believes the KNB's target is a businessman who paid for facilities the church used for seminars. "I know the pastor – he's a patriot and he wouldn't do anything like this." However, Ninel Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, believes the raids are a worrying sign of the increasing power of the KNB.

Officials of the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police in the town of Karaganda [Qaraghandy] and in the capital Astana have refused to explain to Forum 18 News Service why they staged a massive 15-hour raid on Karaganda's Grace Presbyterian Church and several other church-related properties on 24 August. "We cannot tell you," the duty officer at the Karaganda Regional KNB – who refused to give his name - told Forum 18 on 27 August. "We're not an open organisation." Likewise, Kenzhebulat Beknazarov, spokesperson for the national KNB in Astana, refused to explain. "It was in the framework of a criminal case," was all he would tell Forum 18 the same day.

Yeraly Tugzhanov, the head of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee in Astana, declined to discuss the raid with Forum 18 on 28 August. "No-one has appealed to us about this," he declared, before putting the phone down.

Church sources told Forum 18 that the raid – which began at 10 am – was led by a colonel and other officers of the national KNB from the capital. They say it occurred without warning. "Several KNB groups searched every possible thing and place in the entire 3,000 square metre [32,300 square feet] property, including the cellar," one Protestant told Forum 18 on 25 August. "All documents, computers, discs, accounting records and literature were also checked and much was taken away. Those present were forced to write statements. The KNB officers filmed everything." The search lasted until 1 am the following morning. Ordinary police surrounded the church during the whole operation and prevented anyone from arriving or leaving.

Three church-related private homes in Karaganda as well as the Grace Church in Oskemen (Ust-Kamenogorsk) in East Kazakhstan Region were also searched the same day. Computers, discs and documents were taken from these properties.

The leader of the Grace Church, Archbishop Igor Kim, was summoned to the KNB in Karaganda the following day.

Church members are concerned that the building was blockaded for the whole day, that they were forced to write statements and that documents and computers were searched and taken away. The church has been able to hold services since the raid, including Sunday services on 26 August. However, the investigation of computers and documents is expected to last two months, so the church is likely to be without them for all that time.

Church members were told that the raids related to a case under Article 165 of the Criminal Code, which punishes high treason. Sentences under this Article are generally of between ten and fifteen years' imprisonment. The KNB secret police refused to say whether the case is against any church members or someone else.

Aleksandr Klyushev of the Association of Religious Communities of Kazakhstan, a mainly Protestant group, has been following developments closely. He believes the case is directed against a businessman who made donations to cover the rent for the church to hold seminars but who is not a church member.

"This man is now in prison in Almaty and one of the accusations against him was treason, and the case appears to relate to him," Klyushev told Forum 18 from Astana on 27 August. "I don't think this is repression of believers. We understand that the KNB are just doing their job. We hope this was just a check-up and that the authorities will apologise."

However, Klyushev remains concerned that an investigation on charges of high treason is currently underway against Archbishop Kim, as well as his sister and the church administrator. "They and their lawyer have had to sign statements that they will not talk about the case because it is a state secret," Klyushev told Forum 18. "But we are all praying that the investigation will not lead to any charges. I know the pastor – he's a patriot and he wouldn't do anything like this."

The Kazakh authorities have increased controls on religious communities in recent years, especially by banning unregistered religious activity and increasing punishments for it. Among recent victims have been Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to seek state registration, and Jehovah's Witnesses, who have on occasion been among religious communities refused registration arbitrarily (see F18News 23 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=999).

In a long-running dispute, the authorities in the Karasai District near Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty have been seeking to destroy a Hare Krishna commune. They have already bulldozed 26 homes owned by devotees, with the remaining ten or so under threat. An adjoining farm has also been seized, with fears that the farmhouse on the land – in which the commune's temple is located – will also be seized (see F18News 15 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=975).

"Officials told us before the 18 August parliamentary elections that they would move against us once they were over," Hare Krishna spokesperson Maksim Varfolomeyev told Forum 18 from Almaty on 28 August. "We are waiting now. Officials themselves are waiting for possible changes of personnel in the leadership, then they are likely to move." He said the devotees are crammed into the remaining homes. "People are packed in and have to sleep even in corridors."

Klyushev of the Association of Religious Communities of Kazakhstan does not believe at present that the raids on the Grace churches in Karaganda and Oskemen signal a further tightening of controls on religious communities. "Otherwise there would have been such raids on other communities," he told Forum 18.

However, Ninel Fokina, head of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, believes the raids are a sign of the increasing power of the KNB in the wake of the 2005 Law on Extremism and amendments to national security laws. "In Kazakhstan the concept of 'religious extremism' was introduced and religious organisations were included among sources of threats to national security," she told Forum 18 from Almaty on 28 August. She believes subdivisions of the KNB, Interior Ministry and Prosecutor's Office created in the wake of these legal changes are now "trying to justify" their existence.

"See, it has now come to treason!" Fokina declared. "It's a very worrying indicator of the growing influence of the secret police, especially as they are completely out of anyone's control." She is especially worried that such raids on religious communities are taking place as the parliament elected on 18 August is about to take up its work and is likely to adopt the long-promised new Law on Religion (see F18News 21 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=916).

"This new law is being prepared at the initiative of the KNB," Fokina insisted, "and was merely delayed because of the early parliamentary elections." (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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