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KAZAKHSTAN: Increased pressure to complete intrusive questionnaires

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For some years, Kazakhstan has been demanding that non-Muslim religious communities complete highly intrusive questionnaires, Forum 18 News Service has noted. However, there has recently been an apparent increase in both the numbers of communities asked to complete the questionnaires and the pressure officials exert to get the questionnaires completed. The questionnaires, which come in two basic forms, contain very similar questions. Amongst the numerous highly intrusive questions are: the ethnicity of congregation members, their profession, political preferences, "the most influential and authoritative people in the community," foreign missionaries, media contacts, "facts demanding attention on the part of state bodies," military service of congregation leaders, their foreign language knowledge, media articles written, and the full names of leaders' "close friends and comrades." A State Programme, stressing increased monitoring and supervision of religious communities, has recently been adopted. Some religious believers, who wish to remain anonymous, have told Forum 18 that the KNB secret police have increased efforts to recruit spies inside religious communities.

The Kazakh authorities have stepped up their attempts to pressure leaders of religious communities to provide intrusive information on their communities, notably on political preferences and ethnic make-up, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In a process that began several years ago, leaders of non-Muslim communities are given two questionnaires asking intrusive questions both about themselves and their communities. Forum 18 has found that several religious communities in regions far apart from each other have been given the forms in February.

Some leaders are told the information is for a "sociological survey". One official told Forum 18 the information is needed for a database of religious organisations, but refused to say what the database is for. The official insisted that religious leaders can decline to fill in the questionnaires in if they do not want to, but some religious leaders told Forum 18 they face pressure to do so and fear consequences if they do not (see F18News 25 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1092).

The apparent increase in pressure to complete the intrusive questionnaires comes at the same time as a call from President Nursultan Nazarbayev to "suppress the activity of illegal religious movements." It also follows the adoption of a State Programme "On the provision of freedom of belief and enhancement of state-confessional relations in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2007-2009" aimed at unnamed "radical religious movements." It stresses the role of "traditional religions" and outlines an aim to extensively monitor and supervise religious organisations (see F18News 5 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1081). There has in 2008 been an increase in disruptive official check-ups on religious communities, especially on Protestants (see F18News 15 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1089), as well as raids on Baptist and Jehovah's Witness communities (see F18News 22 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1091).

In addition, some religious communities who preferred not to be identified, for fear of state reprisals, have told Forum 18 that the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police has stepped up attempts to recruit spies in their religious communities. The KNB already maintains spies inside religious communities (see F18News 30 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1078). Spies inside a state-registered Baptist congregation are thought to have been behind the 2006 expulsion of a foreign member of the congregation (see F18News 12 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=886).

The two questionnaires, of which Forum 18 has received more than one copy of each from different parts of Kazakhstan, are in Russian and give no information about which agency has produced them. The first specifically relates to religious organisations, while the second – required to be filled in by the leader – appears to be a general form applicable to a wider range of non-governmental organisations.

The first, entitled "Passport of a Religious Association", is three pages long and has 17 questions, several of which expand into sub-sections. After asking for basic information about a religious community – the name, address, telephone number and email address, as well as registration information and the location of the higher religious body the community is part of – questions become more wide-ranging. The name and place of work of the leader must be given, as well as how often a community meets for

worship. The form asks for the number of congregation members, their ethnicity ("Kazakh, Russian, German, Korean, Tatar") and an age breakdown in four bands, the first of which is "up to 18 years". Also required is a breakdown by gender, as well as by profession ("pensioners, workers, state officials, teachers, doctors, university and college students, unemployed").

Other questions cover foreign citizens invited officially to work with the community, religious literature, religious education, charitable work the community is involved in, contacts with other religious communities, contacts with the media, "the most influential and authoritative people in the community", "the most popular political parties and social organisations in the community", "the most severe problems worrying parishioners" and "facts demanding attention on the part of state bodies".

Officials demanded in 2006 that unregistered Baptist Churches across Kazakhstan complete this questionnaire and apply for state registration. As Ninel Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee has pointed out, this violates paragraph 1 of article 19 of the Kazakh Constitution, which states: "Everyone shall have the right to determine and indicate or not to indicate his national, party and religious affiliation" (see F18News 9 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=797).

The second questionnaire, entitled "Reference for the Leader", is two pages long and has 29 questions in three sections covering the leader, the leader's family and "extra information". The leader is asked to provide full personal information, including place and date of birth, religion, ethnicity, details of education, military service (or the reason if the leader has not done military service), and knowledge of foreign languages. The leader is asked to say how many times he or she has been married and whether he or she has ever been prosecuted under the Criminal Code or Code of Administrative Violations. The form asks about "elected duties, experience of administrative work and political popularity", as well as about which media articles the leader features in or has written. The full names of "close friends and comrades" must be listed. Leaders are also asked to list their hobbies.

The family section of the form also asks for details of parents and spouse, including their full names, places and dates of birth, ethnicity, religion, education, work and knowledge of languages. Full details on children also have to be given, as well as information on organisations they belong to and social activity they engage in.

Both questionnaires violate article 18 of the Kazakh Constitution, paragraph 1 of which states: "Everyone shall have the right to inviolability of private life, personal or family secrets, protection of honour and dignity."

Hare Krishna devotees have complained to Forum 18 in 2006 about yet another intrusive questionnaire, which – amongst other detailed questions – enquires into the social classes of members, community printing facilities, foreign missionaries and sources of community funds (see F18News 8 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=885).

The text of the two questionnaires being distributed in different parts of Kazakhstan at present is very similar. However, the questionnaire on religious leaders has been amended slightly in recent years. One questionnaire given to religious community leaders in Akmola Region (around the northern town of Köshetau) in 2005 – of which Forum 18 has a copy – is spread over three pages and has minor differences compared with the current form. Present in the 2005 form but absent from the latest form is a question both about the leader and the leader's spouse: "Sign under the Oriental and Zodiac calendar." The 2005 form also had a question requiring leaders to list the "membership in organisations and social activity" of their children, which has been removed in the current version.

Members of the Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse on principle to register their congregations, arguing that this leads to unwarranted state interference – have told Forum 18 that official pressure to fill in and submit these forms is an illustration precisely of the state intrusion they fear.

Fyodor Zhitnikov of the Jehovah's Witnesses notes that such attempts to collect data using these forms goes in waves, with attempts in recent years from Shymkent in the south to Stepnogorsk in Akmola Region in the north, Aktau [Aqtau] in the west to Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk) in the east. He said October 2007 and December 2007 saw attempts in several locations. "Leaders are summoned and given the questionnaires and asked to fill them in at home and bring them back," he told Forum 18 on 21 February. "Sometimes they are from the Internal Policy Department of local Akimats [administrations], at other times they claim to be conducting sociological investigations."

Zhitnikov said he had received a call from a woman in early February asking him to fill out such forms for his community in Almaty. "She said she was from the Institute of Sociology and conducting a survey. I told her we don't take part in such surveys as we don't consider it necessary."

Among other religious communities to have been given the questionnaires recently is the Hare Krishna community in Karasai District of Almaty Region. Maksim Varfolomeyev of the community told Forum 18 on 18 February that it was visited by two people on 5 February. The two said they were from the local Akimat and gave them the two questionnaires asking that they be filled out promptly and returned. One of the officials identified himself as Beken Umiraliev, who stated he was a leading specialist on non-governmental organisations in the Internal Policy Department in the town Akimat of Keskelen. This is in the southern Karasai District, near the commercial capital Almaty.

Viktor Golous, the chairman of the Hare Krishna commune in Karasai district, then telephoned the Internal Policy Department at Keskelen town Akimat about the questionnaires. "I told them that we are not obliged to fill out such questionnaires asking private questions," Golous told Forum 18 on 8 February. "Umiraliev told me that it was better for us to fill it out and return them." Although the community failed to fill in and return the questionnaires, Golous said that there were no calls or visits later.

One Protestant pastor in Almaty, who did not want his or his church's name mentioned for fear of reprisals by the authorities, told Forum 18 on 18 February that he had been given the questionnaires in mid-February. He said he had filled them out and submitted them to the Internal Policy Department of his District Akimat.

Elsewhere in Kazakhstan in Temirtau in Karaganda region, near the capital Astana, Dmitry Jantsen of the Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 on 18 February that officials of the Internal Policy Department of the local Akimat recently presented him with questionnaires with "very private questions" about their family life. Jantsen said that it was not the first time he was asked to do so and members of his church across Kazakhstan have been given exact copies of those questionnaires several times in recent years.

Forum 18 has also learnt that a non-Muslim and non-Christian community in one of Kazakhstan's western regions – which does not wish to be identified - was given the two forms in early February.

Bishop Janusz Kaleta of the Catholic Church in the western city of Atyrau told Forum 18 on 11 February that they were recently given some questionnaires which they had filled in and returned. (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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