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KAZAKHSTAN: Police "Struggle against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism" - and restaurant meals

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Police from the Department for the Struggle against Extremism, Separatism, and Terrorism have raided a church anniversary meal, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The raid, in Kazakhstan's north-western city of Aktobe, happened while a video was being shown at a celebration meal in a restaurant. Police broke up the meal and demanded to know why people from outside the city were present. Aktobe's deputy police chief, Navruzbai Kadyrkozhaev, evaded answering why anti-terrorist police raided a church meal, and claimed that police "check organisations since there are so many dangerous sects, faith healers, etc." In the long-running struggle of Kazakhstan's Hare Krishna commune to prevent more of their buildings being destroyed, a court has found that the commune's buildings had been constructed and were used lawfully. However, the case is due to continue on 25 November. Also, Kazakh officials are still claiming that an OSCE legislative review of proposed harsh new restrictions on freedom of religion or belief cannot be made public at the request of the OSCE. However, as Ambassador Janez Lenarcic, Director of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), said today (21 November) "the ODIHR would welcome the publication of the legal review".

Police in Kazakhstan's north-western city of Aktobe [Aqtobe] have raided a meal being held by a Protestant church in a restaurant, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Officers from the city police Department for the Struggle against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism raided the New Life Church's anniversary meal in the Kosmos restaurant on 16 November.

The raid happened as harsh new restrictions on freedom of religion or belief are being considered by the parliament. Kazakh officials are still claiming that an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) legislative review of the proposed legal amendments cannot be made public at the request of the OSCE (see F18News 18 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1218).

However, the OSCE has been requesting for some time that Kazakhstan give permission for publication of the review. Ambassador Janez Lenarcic, Director of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), said on 21 November that "the ODIHR would welcome the publication of the legal review, in line with the [Venice Commission / OSCE] Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief" (see <http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD%282004%29028-e>).

New Life Church members told Forum 18 on 18 November that they had rented a room in the restaurant, and 100 people were watching a video about the Church's history, "when five unknown people in plain clothes burst into the room with a video camera." The unknown people – who initially produced no official identification – "rudely" demanded that the organisers and visitors from outside the city leave the room.

Ivan Kryukov, a member of the New Life Church in the southern city of Almaty, told Forum 18 on 19 November that police officers Kayrat Izbanov and Malik Kenzhebaev "applied psychological pressure" to force him to explain in writing why he was visiting Aktobe. The two police officers told Kryukov that he would not be allowed to fly back to Almaty unless he wrote the statement. Two others from outside the city were also held and their passport data recorded. "The officers told us that it was a routine check-up," Kryukov noted, "but no warrants or other papers were produced in legal support of the police raid."

Aktobe's deputy police chief, Navruzbai Kadyrkozhaev, was asked by Forum 18 on 19 November why the police Department for the Struggle against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism raided the church meal. Kadyrkozhaev evaded answering the question and countered with the question "where did the New Life Church come from?" He then stated that he did not know, claiming that police "check organisations since there are so many dangerous sects, faith healers, etc."

On 18 November, two days after the raid, Pastor Zholaman Nurmanov of New Life was summoned to Aktobe police station and "intimidated" into writing a statement that he had invited Kryukov to the meal, church members told Forum 18. Police also demanded that Pastor Nurmanov hand over a church video recording of the meal.

Deputy police chief Kadyrkozhaev stated that he had received a letter of complaint from Kryukov about the police raid. "We will look into the matter and give an official response," Kadyrkozhaev told Forum 18. Asked why the police stopped people from enjoying a restaurant meal, the deputy police chief said that "we just received the complaint. If we see any violations in the actions of our officers, we will punish them."

New Life Church has been evicted from its church building (see F18News 20 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1174), and is collecting the necessary documents for the official permit to purchase a piece of land to build a church building (see F18News 11 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1186). After the last raid on New Life by the Department for the Struggle against Extremism, Separatism, and Terrorism, police insisted this was not a raid (see F18News 30 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1137).

Meanwhile, in the long-running struggle of Kazakhstan's Hare Krishna commune near Almaty, Karasai District Court found on 17 November that the commune's buildings had been constructed and were used lawfully, Maksim Varfolomeev of the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 on 19 November. "The Karasai Akimat (Executive Authority) failed to present the eleven specific documents pertaining to their claim against us," he told Forum 18 from Karasai on 19 November.

The Karasai Akimat had brought the case to try to prove that the community's temple and barn are illegal structures and need to be destroyed (see F18News 28 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1210). Varfolomeev told Forum 18 that the latest hearing was attended by observers from the OSCE.

On 28 October, the community filed a petition to the court to dismiss the case. This was on the grounds of a three year limitation on actions after the legal transfer of the buildings to the community in 2001, Varfolomeev told Forum 18. The community requested the Akimat to withdraw its claim and settle the case amicably. "The Court agreed with us and asked the Akimat to resolve the case amicably," Varfolomeev stated. Karasai Akimat did not present any documents to support their claim.

One witness, R. Elamanov, the official Architect of Karasai District, testified in court that he had examined the buildings in 2001, and found them to be legal. The Akimat is now claiming that this was a mistake.

Karasai Akimat press spokesperson Kanybek Aichanov insisted to Forum 18 on 21 November that the Akimat's case is against three people and not the commune. "These people bought the land and, instead of using it for agriculture purposes based on the contract, they used it for other purposes as well," he stated. Aichanov denied that the Akimat had not submitted the eleven documents the court required. "We are going to press the case to the end," he emphasised. Brushing aside the question of compensation for the commune, he told Forum 18 "let the court decide everything."

The case is due to continue on 25 November. (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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