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KAZAKHSTAN: Pressure on founders to deny re-registration?

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Shortly before the 25 October re-registration deadline for all of Kazakhstan's religious communities, officials pressured nearly a quarter of the signatories on the re-registration application of Grace Protestant Church in Karatutyk to remove their names. "It seems the authorities especially chose to target those founders who are of Kazakh and Uygur ethnicity," the Church's Pastor Zhursyn Koshkinov told Forum 18 News Service. One of the officials told Forum 18 "we only did what we were asked by the District Internal Policy Department." It in turn told Forum 18 the instruction came from the government's Agency of Religious Affairs. ARA official Zhumagali Alimbekov refused to tell Forum 18 how the authorities can demand that the Grace Church signatories reveal whether or not they are active in the Church or write statements to reveal their beliefs while this is not required by the Religion Law. Jehovah's Witness communities have been raided "to make sure we are registered", while a Protestant church's worship was interrupted by the head of a state-backed "anti-sect" centre.

In the run-up to the 25 October deadline for all of Kazakhstan's religious communities to apply for compulsory re-registration if they wish to continue to be able to legally function, officials continued raids on officially registered religious communities. Some raids were ostensibly to check whether or not they have legal status. Officials pressured members of one community of particular ethnic backgrounds to revoke their signatures on its re-registration application, as they told Forum 18 News Service.

Meanwhile, state-backed "anti-sect" centres continued their campaign against some of these communities as "dangerous sects" in the media and in educational institutions. Members of these communities told Forum 18 they fear this may be an attempt by the authorities to justify their possible denial of re-registration.

Two unrelated Protestant Churches in different parts of Kazakhstan - Grace Church in Kazakhstan's capital Astana and New Life Church in Oral (Uralsk) in West Kazakhstan Region - were raided in early October, ostensibly over a criminal case launched 15 months ago (see F18News 19 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1756).

Re-registration of all religious communities was mandated in the highly restrictive amendments to the Religion Law which came into force on 25 October 2011. Signed into law at the same time was an Amending Law amending nine other laws and legal provisions, which similarly violated the country's human rights commitments (see F18News 21 October 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1628).

Re-registration signatories pressured

In mid-October, shortly before the re-registration deadline, Almaty Regional officials made phone calls or visited 14 of the 61 founders who signed the re-registration application of Grace Protestant Church in Karatutyk in the Region's Yenbekshikazakh District. Officials warned the signatories about the dangers of the "sectarian" Grace Church, and demanded that they revoke their signatures on the application, the Church's Pastor Zhursyn Koshkinov and some of the signatories told Forum 18.

"It seems the authorities especially chose to target those founders who are of Kazakh and Uygur ethnicity," Koshkinov told Forum 18 on 19 October.

Tamara Kasymova's home in Karatutyk was visited on 19 October. She and other family members signed the Grace Church's application. Baurzhan Sokurov, Deputy Chief of Karatutyk Administration, along with religious affairs specialists Saule Aytzhanova and Gulmira (last name not given), warned family members to revoke their signatures saying that Grace Church is a "dangerous sect".

Dilshot Kasymov, Kasymova's son, told Forum 18 that he is "weary of all these phone calls and visit from the officials."

"We are not members in any 'sect'," Kasymov told Forum 18. He said that he and his mother signed the Grace Church's application "not because we attend the Church regularly but because they are our neighbours, and we know them. They help people in the neighbourhood and are good people."

Pastor Koshkinov told Forum 18 that the officials told Kasymov that he and his mother must visit the local Administration and write a statement that "they are not members of a sect".

Koshkinov added that the same officials also summoned some members of the Church who had also signed the re-registration application. They demanded that they bring statements to the Administration that they had been Muslims and had converted to Christianity.

"We only did what we were asked"

Sokurov of Karaturyk Administration insisted to Forum 18 on 19 October that "we are not against the church, and we only did what we were asked by the District Internal Policy Department." He explained that District Administration officials asked them to "verify the local residential registration of the signatories".

Sokurov denied that he or the other officials with him put pressure on the Kasymov family or other members of the Church. "They do not need to come to the Administration or write such statements," he claimed to Forum 18.

Ermek Kurmangali, Chief Specialist of Yenbekshikazakh District's Internal Policy Department, told Forum 18 on 19 October that they in their turn were asked by Zhumagali Alimbekov, Almaty Regional representative of Kazakhstan's Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA) to "verify whether or not the founders [Grace Church signatories] resided in the area."

"The Grace Church is not a sect," Kurmangali told Forum 18. "Perhaps the local authorities are inexperienced and did not explain well the purpose of their visit to them."

Alimbekov of the ARA Department told Forum 18 on 19 October from Taldykorgan, the central city of Almaty Region, that the ARA has already approved the Grace Church's charter and other founding documents. "We do not consider the Grace Church a sect." He added that the "only thing left to do is to amend the list of their group of founders. Some are Muslims and are not members of the Church, but signed the application." He did not explain how officials appear to know what faith individuals might adhere to.

Who can be founders?

Forum 18 asked Alimbekov how the authorities can demand that the Grace Church signatories reveal whether or not they are active in the Church or write statements to reveal their beliefs while this is not required by the Religion Law. However, he repeatedly avoided answering.

"The number of their signatories is 61 but they only need 50 or 51," Alimbekov insisted. "However, those must be persons who know what they are doing, and know the Church well. That is all we are asking."

However Kurmangali of Yenbekshikazakh District Administration was more specific. He told Forum 18 that the founders "do not have to be" members of the same organisation. He also said that the signatories are "not obliged" to write statements to the authorities to indicate what religion they believe in or represent.

Will authorities re-register Karaturyk Grace Church?

Asked how he sees the chances of Karaturyk Grace Church being re-registered, Alimbekov of the ARA Department told Forum 18: "Well, we will register them as soon as they present to us the new list of founders." He explained that the Grace Church "should not worry about the [25 October] deadline to submit re-registration documents, because they have already submitted them six months ago, and now they are only making some changes."

Pastor Koshkinov told Forum 18 on 23 October they had a meeting with Alimbekov on 22 October where he recommended them to "remove the names of 14 signatories from the list of founders who are not confident about their signatures and add new ones".

The Pastor said that nine new local residents already agreed to sign the Church's application. Alimbekov "promised to accept the new list and assist us in re-registration," Koshkinov told Forum 18. He added that Alimbekov made one more demand: that their Church's name must be in Kazakh.

Raids "to make sure we are registered"

Over recent weeks, authorities raided meetings of Jehovah's Witness communities in several of Kazakhstan's Regions, a member of one of those communities told Forum 18 on 16 October. For fear of state reprisals and not to cause additional difficulties over re-registration, the individual asked not to reveal their or their community's name.

"Officials in these places usually claimed that someone complained against the community, and so they came to check up on their activity and see if they are not doing anything illegal," the Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "It's strange because these officials

know very well that we always act as an officially registered community. Nevertheless, they disturbed our meetings, as they said, just to make sure that we are registered."

"Anti-sect" activist disrupts service

Meanwhile a service of Christian Family Centre, a Protestant Church in Lisakovsk in Kostanai Region, was disrupted on 3 October by Yuliya Denisenko, Head of the Centre to Help Victims of Destructive Religious Movements. "Denisenko stood up during the Church meeting, and began shouting at the Church leaders and threatening that she will complain against them to the Police," Church members who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 11 October.

Denisenko subsequently complained to the Police. The Church also complained against her to the authorities. However, Church members told Forum 18 that no one from the Church was summoned by the Police as a result of the incident.

Church members told Forum 18 on 23 October that the Prosecutor's Office dismissed the Church's complaint against Denisenko, saying she had not violated the Law. Church members added that they are aware that Denisenko's complaint to the authorities against the Church was also dismissed.

Denisenko refused to tell Forum 18 on 23 October why she had interrupted the Church service. She also refused to say whether she already filed a complaint against the Church to the authorities. "Please, send me your questions in writing," she kept repeating.

However, Church members told Forum 18 that they welcomed the subsequent re-registration of the Church by the authorities. The Church received the re-registration certificate from the local Department of the ARA on 22 October.

State-backed "partner"?

Denisenko admitted to Forum 18 in February 2009 that the majority of the funding for the activity of her Centre and the Kazakhstan-wide Association of Centres for Work with Victims of Destructive Religious Movements which she founded came from the government (see F18News 5 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1250).

Denisenko's Centre is listed among the "partner non-governmental organisations" of Kostanai Regional Akimat (Administration) Internal Policy Department on the Akimat website. It lists the Centre as providing "propaganda in the media of information on the negative influence of destructive religious movements".

Flash-mob on "sectarians"

Zhaik, the Centre to Help Victims of Destructive Religious Movements in Oral, organised a meeting on 14 September dedicated to the "dangers" of non-traditional religions. The meeting, with the financial support of West Kazakhstan Regional Internal Policy Department, was held for school children and university students from across the Region in the Conference Hall of West Kazakhstan Agricultural Technical University in Oral.

Zhaik's website reported on 17 September in its article titled "Flash mob on Sectarians" that the organisers discussed with schoolchildren and students why the young people join "non-traditional religious cults" and how this trend could be stopped.

"The chief aim of the organisers is to safeguard the youth from the influence of the pseudo-religious cults by providing them reliable information on those cults," the article claims.

"A survey was conducted among the schoolchildren and students to find out their position on cults, and hundreds of handout materials were given to the participants explaining the negative outcomes awaiting those who join cults and sects. Also the participants were instructed to follow Kazakh people's traditional Hanafi Muslim movement," the article concluded.

Dangers of "sects"?

Akylbek Sultanov, the University's Vice-rector for educational work, said that their hall, which seats 750 people, was full, and some even stood during the meeting. He said that students from all universities were invited. "We basically discussed the dangers of the sects active in our region, like Grace and New Life Churches to name some," he told Forum 18 on 11 October. He declined to name other organisations he regards as "sects".

Told by Forum 18 that the two organisations he mentioned are officially registered, Sultanov responded: "All these organisations need to be re-registered now, and chances are they will not receive it."

Sultanov could not tell Forum 18 what exactly he finds dangerous in the actions of the two Churches. "They attract young people to their organisations," he responded. When Forum 18 told him that the two Churches have existed in Kazakhstan for many years and have thousands of followers, and that people have the right to choose what they want to believe, Sultanov paused for a moment. He

then appeared to change his statement. "Look, we are a democratic state, and I think the authorities will re-register all organisations which apply for it."

Like other groups against "destructive religious sects", Zhaik also receives government grants. The Kazakh government grants website notes that in March 2011 it won a "special" tender from West Kazakhstan Regional Internal Policy Department for nearly 2.5 million Tenge for "the organisation of prophylactic measures against religious extremism among youth". In March 2010 it had received 900,000 Tenge for this purpose.

"We cannot interfere"

Svetlana Penkova, Press-Secretary of the ARA in Astana, could not explain why the authorities pressured the Grace Church members in Karatutyk or why the West Kazakhstan University conference branded Grace and New Life Churches "dangerous sects". "We cannot interfere in the work of organisations which are independent of us," she insisted to Forum 18. (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Kazakhstan>.

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