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KAZAKHSTAN: No under-18s to attend worship or Sunday School

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Officials forced schoolchildren on Tuesday (18 January) in central Kazakhstan to answer a questionnaire about their religious beliefs and whether they attend a place of worship. This is illegal under Kazakh law, according to lawyer Roman Podoprighora, who told Forum 18 News Service that teachers do not have the right to do this. It follows an earlier directive to conduct compulsory "educational work" with children who attend places of worship and to ban children under the age of 18 from attending places of worship or Sunday School, Forum 18 has found. This is claimed, according to an instruction from the Ministry of Education and Science, to have "the aim of ensuring the security and health of the life of children". The central Education Ministry has denied sending the instruction, although the head of a regional education department has confirmed to Forum 18 that it was sent by the Education Ministry. The instruction is thought to be part of a wider increase in state action against religious activity in Kazakhstan.

On 18 January, schoolchildren in the town of Temirtau [Temirtäü], 35 kilometres (20 miles) north of the regional centre Karaganda [Qaraghandy] in central Kazakhstan, were forced to fill in a questionnaire asking about their religious beliefs and whether they attend a place of worship, local Baptist Dmitri Yantsen told Forum 18 News Service from the town the following day.

"Teachers don't have the right to force schoolchildren to write about their religious convictions," Almaty-based lawyer Roman Podoprighora told Forum 18. Yantsen is concerned that this questionnaire in Karaganda region and an instruction from the department of education of neighbouring Akmola region to all school directors late last year instructing them to conduct compulsory "educational work" with children who attend places of worship are "links in the same chain". Officials have tried to downplay these instructions to Forum 18, insisting they are mere "recommendations", though they follow earlier instructions to school directors not to allow school children to attend places of worship.

"To all school directors," reads the letter sent to school directors in Akmola region in late 2004. "With the aim of ensuring the security and health of the life of children, the Ministry of Education and Science asks you to cooperate in carrying out the following urgent measures:

1. To remove from schools religious literature and leaflets capable of enflaming religious fanaticism.
2. Not to allow underage children to conduct religious rites that contradict the laws of [the republic of Kazakhstan] on the rights of the child (Article 35) and on freedom of conscience and religious associations (Article 5).
3. Draw up a list of participants who attend houses of prayer and Sunday schools.
4. Make these participants attend educational work (compulsory instructions)."

Article 5 of the religion law enshrines the separation of religion from education. It also gives parents or guardians the right to bring up their children in their own faith, but bans them from taking "coercive measures" to impose their faith. Article 35 of the law on the rights of the child repeats these points, though restricts the rights of parents to involve their children in religious rites or activities if this "threatens the life or health of the child, violates his or her rights and limits responsibility". The law defines underage children as those under 18.

"Apart from the section on libraries, where state schools have the right to maintain only a non-religious library, the instructions crudely violate the country's laws," Podoprighora, a lawyer who specialises in religion, told Forum 18 in Almaty on 20 January. "Children have the right to attend places of worship and conduct religious rites with their parents' permission."

Yantsen told Forum 18 that he did not believe the instruction was a local initiative, given that the regional education department referred to instructions it had received from the Education Ministry.

In April 2003 the Education Ministry issued a directive which ordered school directors "not to allow visits by students and children to religious associations and confessions" (see F18News 10 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249). However, the latest instruction is harsher and more categorical than the April 2003 directive.

Education Ministry spokesperson Zhanara Usibekova categorically denied to Forum 18 that her ministry had issued any new instruction about children's religious education. "The last such instruction was issued on 7 April 2003," she told Forum 18 from the capital Astana on 19 January. She also denied any knowledge of any questionnaire being handed out to school children in Karaganda region.

But the head of the school division of Akmola region's education department, Bekzhan Sadvakasov, admitted that last autumn the Education Ministry sent him a letter of recommendation after which they sent on corresponding recommendations to schools. "It wasn't a legal document, only a recommendation," he insisted to Forum 18 on 20 January.

Yantsen argues that such letters are part of a wider increase in state action against religious activity in Kazakhstan (see eg. F18News 7 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=485 and forthcoming F18News article). (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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