

20 July 2005

KAZAKHSTAN: Methodist ordered to leave immediately "or there will be serious trouble"

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

An Uzbek pastor of a Kazakh church, Rashid Turebaev, has been told by police to leave the city of Karaganda "immediately or there would be serious trouble," Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Turebaev has in the past been told by officials that he does not need to re-register his place of residence, but in a sudden reversal has now been fined for not re-registering. He is pastor of the registered Living Vine Methodist Church, and the National Security Service secret police has pressured him to pass on information about foreign citizens – especially Americans - who belong to his congregation. The police have accused Turebaev, without any evidence, of doing unregistered missionary work and struggled to reply to Forum 18's questions as to how Turebaev's work could under the law be seen as missionary activity, and why their has been a sudden change in the official attitude.

Police in the city of Karaganda [Qaraghandy], 250 kilometres (155 miles) south east of the capital Astana, have ordered Protestant pastor Rashid Turebaev, an Uzbek citizen, to leave immediately. "I was formally accused of living in the city without registration, as under Kazakh law all foreigners must be registered with the fiscal police," he told Forum 18 News Service from Karaganda on 18 July. "But the authorities make no secret of the fact that my religious activity is a particular irritation to them." He said the police accused him, without any evidence, of doing missionary work without registration. "They threatened that, if I did not leave the city immediately, there would be serious trouble."

Turebaev, who is pastor of the registered Living Vine Methodist Church, said that, since the time of his arrival in the city in 2001, officials have told him that his registration in the city of Almaty is sufficient and that he does not need to re-register to live in Karaganda. However, in a sudden reversal of this, on 15 July the migration police fined him 19,420 tenge (942 Norwegian kroner, 118 Euros or 143 US dollars) for residence without registration.

He also told Forum 18 that the National Security Service secret police has summoned him several times and pressured him to pass on information about foreign citizens – especially Americans - who belong to the congregation.

The head of the south-east police department in Karaganda, Eduard Aliev, said an investigation into Turebaev's activities has been conducted at the request of the city prosecutor's office. "It has been established that Turebaev has been living in Karaganda without registration since 2001," Aliev told Forum 18 from Karaganda on 18 July. "The akim (governor) of the region has issued a decree that all missionaries must apply to be registered, and Turebaev has not done this." Asked by Forum 18 how Turebaev's work leading services in a Protestant church could under the law be seen as missionary activity, and why their has been a sudden change in the official attitude to Turebaev, Aliev struggled to reply.

The moves against Turebaev have coincided with the Kazakh president's signature to a new law introducing changes and amendments to a range of laws – including the religion law - on grounds of national security, which has been severely criticised by Kazakh and international human rights activists and organisations for substantially restricting religious freedom (see F18News 15 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=608). Amongst the critics of the law has been the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which Kazakhstan wants to be Chairman-in-Office of in 2009. Under the new law missionary activity is defined as "promoting a religion by means of religious proselytising preaching which is not included in the statute of a religious organisation that is active in Kazakhstan".

Aleksandr Klyushev, head of the Association of Religious Organisations in Kazakhstan, told Forum 18 that "only a few Protestant communities are registered in Kazakhstan and so Turebaev can't legally be seen as a missionary," Klyushev told Forum 18 from Astana on 19 July. "It seems strange that the police are so flagrantly flouting a law that has only just been signed by the president."

For a personal commentary on the legal moves to seriously restrict religious freedom in Kazakhstan under the guise of "national security", 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=249

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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