

20 July 2005

KAZAKHSTAN: Religious minorities face increasing state pressure

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Baptists, other Protestants, Ahmadiya Muslims, non-state controlled Muslims and Hare Krishna devotees have all come under increasing pressure in the wake of Kazakhstan's breaking of international human rights standards with its harsh new "national security" law, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Amongst current cases known to Forum 18, a Protestant church has had its rental contact cancelled by a local authority; a Baptist pastor is on trial for refusing to register his church; the head of the minority Ahmadiya Muslim community has fled the country for fear of arrest; attempts are being made to close down the independent non-state controlled Union of Muslims of Kazakhstan (UMK); and a local authority has refused to allow a Hare Krishna festival to be celebrated.

Religious minorities face increasing pressure in Kazakhstan, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Baptists, Ahmadiya Muslims, an independent non-state controlled Muslim association and Hare Krishna devotees have all come under pressure in the wake of the passage of a new law which severely restricts religious freedom, thus breaking Kazakhstan's international human rights commitments (see F18News 15 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=608).

Aleksandr Klyushev, head of the Association of Religious Organisations in Kazakhstan, told Forum 18 that as soon as local Protestants rented a building in the town of Kokchetav [Koschetav] in central Kazakhstan, the town administration telephoned the landlord and told him to tear up the contract. Also, the pastor of a Methodist church in Karaganda has been told by police to "leave immediately or there would be serious trouble" (see F18News 20 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=611)

Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries - have along with other Protestants suffered numerous fines for refusing to register even before the new law made this a legal requirement (see F18News 30 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=572). A Baptist representative told Forum 18 that "We're very distressed that the new religion law has made registration of religious communities compulsory," Dmitry Yantsen told Forum 18 from Temirtau on 19 July.

Yantsen told Forum 18 that "refusing registration is a question of principle for us" and that Council of Churches Baptists had met parliamentary deputies and tried to convince them that by making registration compulsory, they would be forcing Baptists to violate their religious principles. "Alas, our views were not listened to." Forum 18 was also told by Yantsen that, in the wake of the adoption of the new law, "persecution" will increase sharply. "Indeed, it's already started." He pointed out that in Stepnogorsk 140 kilometres (87 miles) north of Astana, the trial of Baptist pastor Fyodor Tkachenko is about to take place for refusing to register his church.

The minority Ahmadiya Muslim community is also under pressure. On 6 June in Almaty, officials from the fiscal police and the National Security Service secret police searched the apartment of Ahmed Muzofar, a Pakistan citizen who heads Kazakhstan's Ahmadiya community. The officials did not even allow Muzofar's wife to put on a scarf. On 25 June a criminal case was launched against Muzofar and he left Kazakhstan for fear of arrest.

Nurman Shormanov, an investigator with the fiscal police, insisted that Muzofar was engaged in "illegal financial practices" and this was the sole reason for his difficulties. "For example, he has been lending out money with interest," he told Forum 18 from Almaty on 19 July. "The criminal case against him has nothing to do with his religious beliefs."

However, Muzofar's lawyer Zhan Kogorkin believes his client's religious activity was the reason for the moves against him. "The fiscal police did not want to bring a criminal case against Muzofar – the Security Service insisted on it," he told Forum 18 from Almaty on 19 July. "I believe their interest in this case has something to do with Muzofar's religious beliefs. They are simply too eager to uncover a new Al-Qaeda in Kazakhstan."

In January 2005, the authorities in South Kazakhstan region tried to expel from the country, a Pakistani citizen Said Hasan Tahir Bukhari, who headed the Ahmadiya community in South Kazakhstan region (see F18News 10 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=486).

The independent non-state controlled Union of Muslims of Kazakhstan (UMK) is facing attempts by the state-controlled Spiritual

Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (the Muftiate) to close the UMK down. A hearing was held in the Almaty inter-district economic court on 19 July, to have the registration of the UMK revoked, the head of the Union Murat Telibekov told Forum 18 on 20 July. The case was brought by the Muftiate and signed by the Chief Mufti, Absattar kazi Derbisali.

The Muftiate claimed that Telibekov was involved in opposition political activity and that, as it is illegal under the religion law to create political parties and social organisations defined by religion, the UMK's registration should be revoked. The Muftiate also complained that the UMK's title implied that it functioned over the whole of the country, and should therefore have been registered by the country's Justice Ministry, and not "in violation of the norms of the law" by the justice administration in Almaty. A further Muftiate claim was that some of the organisations described as the UMK's founders – including the Rukhaniyat Muslim University, the Ikhlas cultural centre for ethnic Russian Muslims and the Abu-Dhabi charitable organisation - "categorically denied their membership of the UMK".

"It is noteworthy that we heard about the hearing from journalists," Telibekov told Forum 18. "The Muftiate was trying to deprive us of registration without our participation, but when the Muftiate representatives saw us and many journalists at the court building, they preferred to disappear and the hearing was postponed."

Telibekov attributes his Union's problems to the new national security amendments. "The new law strengthens state control over the life of believers," he told Forum 18. "And the Muftiate, which follows the will of the government, has not missed the opportunity to exploit this." Telibekov maintains that the independence of his UMK has angered the Muftiate, which has been trying to bring all Muslim communities under its control, with the backing of the state (see F18News 7 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=599)

Valentina Vidiya (Volkovaya), who leads Kazakhstan's Hare Krishna community, told Forum 18 that her fellow-devotees experienced a sharp deterioration in their situation just before the adoption of the new national security law. Before the law was passed, she warned that it posed a "serious danger" (see F18News 25 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=520).

"The authorities have been trying to seize land that belonged to the Krishna commune," she told Forum 18 from Almaty on 18 July. "Luckily, we have managed to insist on our rights in court. But literally days before the president signed the new law we found out about a new problem. For obvious reasons, the authorities in Keskelen district (a suburb of Almaty, where a Krishna farm is situated) refused to allow us to celebrate a religious festival" (see F18News 24 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=497 and 1 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=502).

Kazakhstan's human rights ombudsperson, Bolat Baikadamov has criticised the fact that the new national security amendments will violate religious freedom. "We worked on this issue as an expert institution and we sent our conclusions to parliament," he told a press conference. "Unfortunately the view prevailed that questions on missionaries and registration of religious organisations were themes that had to be covered in the draft law."

The Interfax news agency quoted Baikadamov on 18 July as saying that he had received "a fairly large number of complaints" about the amendments, not only from the former Soviet republics, but from around the world. He said that between 19 April and 10 June, more than 100 appeals came in from members of the Council of Churches Baptists within Kazakhstan and abroad.

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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