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KAZAKHSTAN: Continued state hostility to independent Muslims and Hare Krishna devotees

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Kazakhstan continues to try to suppress non-state controlled Muslim organisations, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The latest attempt by the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan (the Muftiate) to close down the independent Union of Muslims in Kazakhstan (UMK) is a court case, due to begin on 17 October. The Muftiate claims that a newspaper interview given by the UMK's head, Murat Telibekov, cost the Muftiate the astonishing figure of 10 million tenge [487, 244 Norwegian Kroner, 62,320 Euros, or 74,690 US Dollars]. Hare Krishna devotees also continue to experience state hostility. The latest government attempt to close down a Hare Krishna farm on the outskirts of Almaty is an accusation that the community acquired the land in 1992 using forged documents. "It is quite evident to us that the head of the administration is simply carrying out orders from higher up," the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Kazakhstan told Forum 18.

Kazakhstan continues to try to suppress non-state controlled Muslim organisations, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. On Monday 17 October, there is to be a hearing at the Auezovsky district court in the commercial capital, Almaty, to consider a case brought by Absattar kazi Derbisali, head of the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan (the Muftiate), against the Megapolis newspaper and the head of the Union of Muslims in Kazakhstan (UMK) Murat Telibekov.

Telibekov of the UMK told Forum 18 on 11 October that the basis for the case is an interview he gave, published under the title "Islam against Islam" in Megapolis on 30 May 2005. The Muftiate claims that this interview "occasioned the Spiritual Administration, its staff and the imams at the mosques a huge moral loss" which they claim in financial terms cost them the astonishing figure of 10 million tenge [487, 244 Norwegian Kroner, 62,320 Euros, or 74,690 US Dollars].

This is the fourth legal case bought against the UMK this year to try to close it down, in which the Muftiate has been either directly or indirectly involved (see F18News 23 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=635).

"I believe that I have become a victim of deliberate state policy. The state does not want independent Muslim organisations to exist," Telibekov commented to Forum 18. "The Muftiate, which de facto forms part of the state apparatus, is simply carrying out the authorities' orders to eradicate our independent organisation. Interestingly, I received a call from the President's office and was told to stop my 'illegal activity'. Amanbek Mukhashev, chairman of the secretariat of the government's Council for Relations with Religious Organisations, called me an 'impostor' and also told me to disband my organisation," Murat Telibekov told Forum 18 on 11 October

"Murat Telibekov is just an impostor," Amanbek Mukhashev claimed to Forum 18 from the Kazakh capital city, Astana, on 12 October, thus confirming Telibekov's claim. In a clear indication of state hostility to the idea of an independent Muslim organisation, Mukhashev stated that "somehow or other Telibekov managed to register his organisation as a public one rather than a religious one, and claim that he has the impertinence to speak for Kazakh Muslims. There are no professional theologians in the so-called Union of Muslims in Kazakhstan. There are just journalists and former students from the medresseh. These people have no right to call themselves the Union of Muslims in Kazakhstan."

Another religious group independent of the authorities, Hare Krishna devotees, continue to experience state hostility. For several years the authorities have been trying to close down a farm owned by the Krishna community on the outskirts of Almaty, the only Hare Krishna farming commune in the entire Commonwealth of Independent States (see F18News, 24 January http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=497 and 1 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=502).

Despite previous failures to close the commune down, the authorities are continuing their attempts. "We now face a new absurd accusation that the community acquired the land in 1992 using forged documents. At the same time, the Akim [Mayor] is trying to seize the agricultural plots from their Hare Krishna owners. It is quite evident to us that the head of the administration is simply carrying out orders from higher up. We have appealed several times to the secretary of the Kazakh government's Council for Relations with Religious Organisations, Amanbek Mukhashev, but he simply does not want to listen to us," Rati Manjari (Ekaterina Levitskaya), of the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Kazakhstan, told Forum 18 on 11 October from Almaty.

Mukhashev told Forum 18 on 12 October that he was well aware of the Hare Krishna farming commune's case. In an apparent attempt to justify state and societal intolerance, he stated that "there are 3,330 religious communities registered in Kazakhstan, 13 of which are Hare Krishna communities. So why are members of the farming commune the only ones to be constantly on trial? The Krishna followers should probably give some thought to their relations with neighbouring representatives of other faiths, who are openly hostile to the Krishna believers' presence." As Forum 18 has documented, hostility to the Hare Krishna commune comes from state authorities.

Protestants have also experienced increasing problems since the passage in July 2005 of "national security" legal changes (see F18News 8 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=645).

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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=249 and articles on the 2005 "national security" legal amendments at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=608 and http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=625

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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