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KAZAKHSTAN: Crackdown on religious freedom continues

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

A Pentecostal theological college is facing attempts by the authorities to close it, along with a media campaign against the college, and the dramatic increase in fines of unregistered Baptists has continued, Forum 18 News Service has found. These are the latest developments in Kazakhstan's crackdown on religious freedom. The Shymkent Prosecutor's Office is prosecuting the local Elim Seminary for not having an Education Ministry licence – even though the college immediately applied for a licence when this requirement was introduced in May. The Prosecutor, Erzhan Ezaliev, claimed to Forum 18 that "Personally I am neutral towards Protestants. But the law is the same for everybody." In 2005, the same Prosecutor's Office - without any legal grounds for its action - also tried to close the Seminary. Also, two Baptists, one a Pastor, have been fined for unregistered activity and breaking an order banning a church. The fines imposed are much greater than the previous norm.

A District Prosecutor's office in the city of Shymkent, the regional centre of South Kazakhstan region, is trying to close down a local Protestant theological college, arguing that it is illegal as it does not have a licence from the Education Ministry. The Prosecutor's office of Shymkent's Enbekshin district submitted a lawsuit to the district court in early July demanding the closure of the Elim Seminary, even though it has applied for such a licence, a local Protestant who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 News Service from Shymkent on 13 July.

The attempt to close the Seminary comes amid a growing crackdown on religious activity without state approval. Leaders of Baptist congregations that refuse to register on principle are facing sharply increased fines (see F18News 9 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=797). There has also been a recent banning of and media campaign against an unregistered church, as well as a Hare Krishna commune (see F18News 2 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793).

The Shymkent-based Protestant told Forum 18 that the same Prosecutor's Office tried to close the Elim Seminary last year on the same grounds, launching a simultaneous campaign against it in the local press. However, on that occasion the Enbekshin district court considered the complaint to be without foundation since the law did not require a licence from the Ministry of Education for teaching in religious institutions.

This is part of wider state hostility against religion and education. The Ministry of Education has previously ordered schools to stop children attending all religious communities, as well as ordering compulsory "educational work" with children who disobey the ban (see F18News 20 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=494).

"In May of this year (2006)," the Protestant told Forum 18, "the government issued a decree requiring teaching in religious institutions also to have a licence from the Ministry of Education." The Protestant reported that, when it heard this, the Seminary immediately stopped teaching students and submitted the documents to obtain a licence from the Ministry of Education. "So, the lawsuit from the Prosecutor's Office is absurd: the Seminary is now not engaged in teaching and is waiting for the decision of the Ministry of Education." Forum 18's source believes that in reality the Prosecutor's Office is acting on behalf of the regional authorities, who are alarmed by the growth in the numbers of Protestant Christians in the region.

The Chief Prosecutor of the Enbekshin district of Shymkent city insists he was guided only by the law. "It is a lie that the seminary has stopped teaching students," Erzhan Ezaliev told Forum 18 on 13 July. "According to our information there are at present six students studying there. Personally I am neutral towards Protestants. But the law is the same for everybody."

The attempt to close down the Shymkent Seminary is a result of the hardening of the Kazakh government's religious policy. In July 2005 President Nursultan Nazarbayev signed into law controversial "national security" amendments which added an article to the law on religion making registration compulsory (see F18News 15 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=608). The Code of Administrative Offences was also amended to add new provisions punishing unregistered religious activity (see F18News 8 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701). This set of legal changes was a signal of the government's desire to increase sharply controls over the activities of religious communities.

After these changes were enacted, a sharp increase began in the fines levied on members of the Council of Churches Baptists, who

refuse to register their congregations as a matter of principle, regarding such registration as "sinful". Whilst a year ago fines imposed by the courts on the Baptists rarely exceeded 13,000 Tenge (685 Norwegian Kroner, 87 Euros, or 109 US Dollars), more recently fines have dramatically increased.

On 27 June the Zyryanovsk District Specialised Administrative Court, in the East Kazakhstan Region, found Baptist pastor Yegor Prokopenko guilty under article 374-1 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes leading and participating in the activity of an unregistered religious community. The court noted that he had failed to abide by a 2002 Order banning the church's activity. He was fined 103,000 Tenge (5,425 Norwegian Kroner, 686 Euros or 870 US Dollars), local Baptists told Forum 18 on 11 July.

The same day, the Court also sentenced a member of the congregation, Pyotr Shevel, to a fine of 51,500 Tenge (2,713 Norwegian Kroner, 343 Euros, or 435 US Dollars).

The fine on Prokopenko equals the record fine for unregistered religious activity imposed in May on another Baptist pastor, Yaroslav Senyushkevich, who leads a congregation in the capital Astana (see F18News 9 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=797).

Average monthly salaries have been estimated to be roughly equivalent to 260 US Dollars (1,589 Norwegian Kroner, 204 Euros, or 31,535 Tenge). (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=701

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806

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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