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KAZAKHSTAN: Interrogations and threats follow charity action

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Nurbai Arystanov, a Protestant who lives in the town of Arys in South Kazakhstan region, was threatened and briefly detained on 5 March by police, who objected to the fact that he was distributing gifts from the Good Samaritan international charity. One local Protestant, who asked not to be named, claimed to Forum 18 News Service that the Arys deputy police chief, Kurmanal Rakhmatulayev, personally interrogated believers who were listed as having received gifts, and confiscated gifts from those who had received them. He also threatened believers that he would plant hashish in the gifts. "It's all nonsense," Rakhmatulayev told Forum 18, denying that he had threatened Arystanov. But, citing Arystanov's lack of a local residence permit, Rakhmatulayev warned: "I will not allow him to operate in our town."

On 5 March Nurbai Arystanov, a Protestant who lives in the town of Arys, 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of Chimkent, the administrative centre of South Kazakhstan region, was threatened and briefly detained by police. The police objected to the fact that Arystanov, a member of the Chimkent-based Bible Centre, was distributing gifts from the Good Samaritan international charity. One local Protestant, who asked not to be named, claimed to Forum 18 News Service that the Arys deputy police chief, Kurmanal Rakhmatulayev, personally interrogated believers who were listed as having received gifts, and confiscated gifts from those who had received them. He also threatened believers that he would plant hashish in the gifts. One police official confirmed that Arystanov had been detained but told Forum 18 that he was held for no more than an hour.

In the wake of Arystanov's detention, attempts were made to prove that there was nothing wrong or illegal in the gift distribution. But when a church official arrived from Chimkent and presented a copy of the organisation's registration documents and papers for the gifts, they were seized by the chief of the State Internal Affairs Administration. The church official was then subjected to extensive insults and threats. One source, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 that the director of School Number 8 in Arys received a peremptory order "to exclude Arystanov's children from school". The divisional police inspector took Arystanov's personal belongings - books, tapes and the remaining gifts - from his apartment. Rakhmatulayev invited in officials from the public procuracy and the National Security Committee (the former KGB), who joined him in putting pressure on Arystanov because of his activity as a Protestant.

However, speaking to Forum 18 by telephone from Arys on 11 March, Rakhmatulayev rejected any suggestions that he had acted unlawfully. "It's all nonsense," he insisted. "I did not order that Arystanov's children be excluded from school and I did not make threats against any of the believers." However, he argued that as the Bible Centre is registered in Chimkent "it has no right to carry out charitable activity in our town". (Kazakhstan's law on religion says nothing about a religious association only being able to carry out charitable work in the town in which it is registered.)

"The Bible Centre's statute also states that it may carry out charitable work only among the poor," Rakhmatulayev added. "However, the people who received gifts included some who were not poor." He complained that Arystanov did not have a residence permit for Arys and had not registered there (several republics in the former Soviet Union retain the Soviet practice of obliging visitors to register with the police). "In other words, he is just a vagrant, and I will not allow him to operate in our town," Rakhmatulayev told Forum 18.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY