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KAZAKHSTAN: "Economic war" to crush Baptists?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Homes, cars, washing machines and even pigs have all been confiscated or subject to bailiff's orders as Council of Churches Baptists refuse to pay fines imposed in retaliation for conducting worship services without registration. Now courts are ordering the money to be automatically deducted from wages. "We can't do anything about it if they just take the money," Andrei Penner – who spent 24 hours in prison in March for leading his unregistered congregation - told Forum 18 News Service from Karaganda after officials ordered his pay to be docked. "Of course it's war, economic war," Dmitri Jantsen of a Baptist congregation in Temirtau near the capital Astana told Forum 18. "They want to subject our churches to state control." No religious affairs official was available to explain to Forum 18 why Council of Churches Baptists are being harassed simply because they wish to worship without state registration and why state officials are pressuring the Baptists to subject themselves to the intrusive reporting procedures which all registered faiths have to endure.

Members of a network of Baptist churches that refuse to register with the authorities because they believe it leads to state interference in their activities have complained to Forum 18 News Service of increasing fines which they believe are designed to crush their activities. "Of course it's war, economic war," Dmitri Jantsen of a Baptist congregation in the town of Temirtau near the capital Astana told Forum 18 on 11 May. "They're handing down fines and confiscating cars, washing machines and even pigs when we refuse to pay. They want to subject our churches to state control." He maintains that the number and level of fines are increasing.

Forum 18 was unable on 11 May to reach any official at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Astana to find out why Council of Churches Baptists are being harassed simply because they wish to worship without state registration and why state officials are pressuring the Baptists to subject themselves to the intrusive reporting procedures which all registered faiths have to endure. Officials have in the past always defended such punishments to Forum 18.

The increased pressure on Council of Churches Baptists comes as officials are continuing their campaign to confiscate the entire property of a Hare Krishna commune near the country's commercial capital Almaty (see F18News 4 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=952). In the latest move, on 8 May the Supreme Court ruled that the Hare Krishna-owned farm, where the temple is located, can be confiscated at any time (see F18News 6 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=970).

Jantsen listed many recent cases against Baptist leaders across Kazakhstan who have been fined under Article 375 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes religious activity by unregistered communities. On 26 April, a court fined Oleg Kosenko, who leads the church in the village of Borovoe in Akmola Region, 22,000 Tenge (1,107 Norwegian Kroner, 135 Euros or 183 US Dollars). The average monthly wage in small towns is estimated at 35,000 Tenge, with more in bigger cities and much less in villages.

On 13 March, a court in Aktobe [Aqtobe] again fined Andrei Grigoryev 109,000 Tenge, while four others were fined 54,000 Tenge. "The hearing was full of false statements and falsification of facts," Grigoryev told Forum 18 from Aktobe on 11 May. "They had already decided to fine us." He said one of those fined told the court he was not leading the service, but was then asked if he was singing and praying. "He said he was, so he was fined merely for singing and praying." The five appealed to the Regional Court, but in April the court rejected the appeal, he added.

The church has previously been "banned" by court order and Grigoryev has been fined more than once (see F18News 13 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=931).

Grigoryev said they all refused to pay the fines. "We are not guilty." Court executors then started seizing property, including his car, washing machine and even a cart. "Most of the things were old and not worth much," he told Forum 18, "so they then issued a bailiff's order on two houses, one where the church meets and the other where we live, which I have from my parents. They're not driving us out yet, but we cannot do anything, such as selling them. This is illegality – they're doing just what they want."

Grigoryev said two of his colleagues sentenced in March also had property taken, including a car, while another has had money docked from his wages, a growing practice. "They've taken 37,000 Tenge from him already and they still have 17,000 to take." He

said the courts take no account of the large families that many Baptists have. "Two of us have five children each that we have to support. Court executors just say it is their job, but they take our property to try to force us to go and pay the fines."

Pastor Yaroslav Senyushkevich – who is married with five children and whose wife does not work - told Forum 18 from Astana that officials have just ordered that half his salary be docked at source each month to pay his fine of 103,000 Tenge. "They wanted to confiscate our car, but that is not in my name," he told Forum 18 on 11 May. "They know I work, so they are seizing the money that way."

Jantsen complained that one family in a village near Taldykorgan [Taldyqorgha] in Almaty Region received a bailiff's order from court executors on two pigs after the family refused to pay earlier fines. "The family is still feeding the pigs but they could be taken at any time. I don't know what the executors are intending to do with them – maybe they'll have a feast," Jantsen joked.

When Andrei Penner, who leads the congregation in Karaganda [Qaraghandy], refused to pay his fine of more than 50,000 Tenge imposed last autumn by Karaganda Administrative Court, he was again taken to court. At a hearing in March he was punished by being sent to prison for 24 hours. "Now they are about to deduct the amount from my salary," he told Forum 18 from Karaganda on 11 May. "We can't do anything about it if they just take the money."

Baptists are also prosecuted under other Administrative Code articles for refusing to abide by earlier court rulings to close churches. On 11 April, Aleksei Skomorokha from Rudny in Kustanai [Qostanay] Region was fined 54,000 Tenge under Article 524. He had refused to pay a fine of 51,500 Tenge imposed last September (see F18News 2 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=848).

Courts are continuing to "ban" Baptist congregations because they are unregistered. At a hearing in Zhambyl Region at the end of March, a court ordered Abraam Pankrat and Valter and Margarita Zerman to halt the activities of the local congregation, claiming its activities are illegal.

Police raids also continue, Jantsen told Forum 18. On 18 April police again came to the church in Shchuchinsk in Akmola Region, ordering church members to visit the public prosecutor's office. "They made the standard accusation – why won't you register?"

On 4 May the criminal police raided the congregation in the village of Kievka near Karaganda. They broke up the meeting and demanded that all those present write statements about what they were doing. "Our people said it was a private house, but they still behaved very crudely," Jantsen complained to Forum 18. "The police said they have the right to go into any private house." The congregation leader was taken to the police station for refusing to write a statement. "They wanted to intimidate him – we don't know if they will take him to court."

Council of Churches Baptists have repeatedly asked the authorities to abide by the religious freedom provisions in the country's constitution and in international human rights agreements the government has signed up to. They tried to meet President Nursultan Nazarbayev to put their concerns, but officials declared in January that the president was "too busy" to meet them (see F18News 30 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=904). (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 and a survey of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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