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KAZAKHSTAN: Criminal investigation, "hallucinogenic" Communion drink, "extremist" books?

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Two unrelated Protestant Churches in different parts of Kazakhstan were raided in early October, ostensibly over a criminal case launched 15 months ago. The case follows a complaint by the mother of a member of Astana's Grace Church that it harmed her health, allegations Church members denied to Forum 18 News Service. Masked police searched the Church and seized computers, valuables and religious books they insisted were "extremist" (though they could not explain what was extremist or who had declared them so). Police requested church members to give blood specimens to see if the Church uses "hallucinogenic" substances for Communion. Nine days later the unrelated New Life Church in Oral (Uralsk) was raided in the same case. Asked by Forum 18 why masked police broke into Grace Church in a manner Church members found threatening, Senior Investigator Vyacheslav Glazkov adamantly denied this. "We did not threaten anyone, we just made a search." Members of both Churches fear the authorities will use the case to prevent them gaining the compulsory re-registration for religious communities to be allowed to continue operating after 25 October.

Two unrelated Protestant Churches 1,400 kilometres (870 miles) apart were raided in early October as authorities investigate a criminal case that Grace Church in Kazakhstan's capital Astana harmed the health of a church member, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Although the criminal case was launched in July 2011, Grace Church members told Forum 18 they knew nothing about it until the 3 October 2012 raid. New Life Church in Oral in West Kazakhstan Region was raided on 12 October. Although the raids were ostensibly in connection with the criminal case, police seized valuables, computers and Christian literature which they insist is "extremist" and banned, though no official was able to explain to Forum 18 whether the specific titles are banned or not and, if they are, which authority banned them.

Police revisited Astana's Grace Church today (19 October), but as they did not have a warrant church members refused to let them in, they told Forum 18.

The raids came just before the 25 October deadline for the re-registration of all religious communities across Kazakhstan. This was mandated in the highly restrictive amendments to the Religion Law which came into force on 25 October 2011. Signed into law at the same time was an Amending Law amending nine other laws and legal provisions, which similarly violated the country's human rights commitments (see F18News 21 October 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1628>).

Grace Church's lawyer Riza Nurbayeva told Forum 18 that she fears that the criminal case will be used to cancel their registration. She said the Astana Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA) officials who received their re-registration application have already told them it will not be considered until their name is cleared, and the criminal case is terminated.

Similarly, Maxim Maximov, the leader of the New Life Church in Kazakhstan and Almaty-based CNL Christian Television, said on his Facebook page that he fears that the raid on their Oral community may be because the authorities "do not want to re-register them".

Grace Churches were also raided in Karaganda, Saran in Karaganda Region, Almaty, and other regions of Kazakhstan in early October. In at least one location, officials are pressuring Grace Church members to take their names off the community's re-registration application. Also raided have been other Protestant Churches and Jehovah's Witness communities, while mosques have been closed down (see forthcoming F18News article).

Astana Grace Church raid

Nine police officers led by Senior Investigator Vyacheslav Glazkov burst into Astana's Grace Church on 3 October, disrupting a service then underway. They were accompanied by several officials who did not reveal their identity. Masked officers surrounded the Church building and did not allow anyone present to leave while the officials carried out a search, Church lawyer Nurbayeva told Forum 18.

Police searched the entire building all day long. "The officials led all the Church members into one room during the search, and kept them there as criminals."

The Police told Church members the raid was in connection with an investigation under Criminal Code Article 103, Part 1 (intentional inflicting of serious harm to health). The Article carries a punishment of restrictions on freedom or imprisonment of between three and seven years. The case was opened on the complaint of a Church member's mother on 21 July 2011.

Warrants

However, not only did officials target Astana's Grace Church - they also targeted another Protestant Church, New Life in Oral (Uralsk) in West Kazakhstan Region.

The search warrants - seen by Forum 18 - were signed by Prosecutor Alan Tlenichiyev of Astana's Almaty District and Senior Investigator Glazkov of the City Police. Grace Church's warrant was signed by both officials on 2 October, the day before the search was carried out. The New Life Church's warrant was signed on 9 October by Glazkov and on 10 October by Tlenchiyev. The raid was carried out on 12 October.

The texts of the one-page warrants are identical. They say that Gulzahira Almenova, mother of Grace Church member Lazzat Almenova, on 21 July 2011 "complained to the Police that Astana Grace Church's adherents inflicted serious damage to her daughter's health. It was verified that Lazzat Almenova attended Grace Church for the last four years, where she was subjected to lengthy and continuous psychological influence aimed at forming psychological and emotional addiction. In the course of investigation of the criminal case, it is necessary to conduct a search (..) at the location of the Astana Grace Church [New Life Church in the other warrant]."

However, in the New Life warrant, the officials gave no explanation why a search at New Life Church is necessary, or how New Life Church is linked to Almenova or the criminal investigation into a different religious community.

Funds and books confiscated

During the 3 October raid, police seized "a handful" of gold items from Grace Church's safe, as well as all the computers and DVDs, Nuriyeva told Forum 18. Police took copies of some books - including "Worthy Answers" by two local Protestants, Galymzhan Tanatgan and Zhomart Temir, and a Kazakh translation of "Healing the Broken Family of Abraham" by American Protestant Don McCurry - saying these were "banned extremist literature".

Police also examined the Church's printing press and sealed the room where it is located.

The police also froze the Church's savings in a local bank - about 6 million Tenge (225,000 Norwegian Kroner, 30,000 Euros or 40,000 US Dollars) which the Church has been collecting over many years to buy land.

Blood samples

Eleven church members - men and women of various ages - were taken to the nearby hospital for blood samples to be taken. "The police did not force us to do so but asked us if we were ready to give blood samples to see whether or not drugs are administered in the Church," 22-year old Viktor Sorokin, a church member for the last seven years, told Forum 18 on 17 October. "We agreed to have our blood tested to show the investigation that their allegations are wrong."

However, Sorokin and other Church members told Forum 18 that among the volunteers for the blood tests were a man and a woman who are not known well by the Church as they have been attending for only about a month.

Sorokin told Forum 18 that officials have not given the results of the blood tests to him or other Church members.

Pastors questioned

On 4 October the Regional Police Department summoned Grace Church's Pastor, Bakhytzhon Kashkumbayev, and his Assistant, Pastor Igor Zuyev, for questioning.

Although the raid was ostensibly linked to a criminal case related to the alleged treatment of church member Almenova, only two of the police's questions were related to her: whether the pastors knew her and which church meetings she attended, Nurbayeva told Forum 18.

However, police asked many unrelated questions, including: who founded the Church; why they became members in the Church; what the word "Grace" means; whether the Church has ties abroad; who finances the Church; what the meaning of tithes or offerings is; whether tithes are compulsory; why offerings are collected by individuals walking round the Church; what hierarchy exists in the

Church; what one must do to become a minister in the Church; what ministries the Church has; what the term "God's people" means; what the Communion ritual is; what "speaking in tongues" is; whether the Church's religious propaganda affects members' consciousness and sub-consciousness; why people seen in the video records of the Church become ecstatic when they speak in tongues and lose self-control and monotonously repeat the same phrases; whether the pastors are familiar with group psychotherapy, hypnosis, corporeal psychotherapy, musical therapy, neuro-linguistic programming, rational therapy, introduction into the state of altered consciousness; where the Church receives its literature; and what the word "Gospel" means for Kazakhstan.

Although she is the Church's lawyer, Nurbayeva said that neither she nor the pastors were given copies of the interrogation records. She was only allowed to look at them and note down the contents.

Police allegations through the media

In the wake of the raid, local news agency Tengrinews cited Astana City's Police Department on 10 October as declaring: "Members of the religious association Grace [Church] in Astana were given hallucinogens to drink." Police told the news agency that a 34-year old woman from Astana was "hospitalised after a regular visitation of the religious service with a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia with a risk of suicide".

"The police established that the Grace Church's pastor during the service serves his visitors a red-coloured drink, which according to the expertise of the Centre for research of medicinal drugs contains phenol group substance as well as hallucinogens, which cause euphoria and relaxation of humans," the report said.

The police also told the news agency that it "found and confiscated samples of the drink and literature presumably containing signs of religious hostility and discord, which is currently being checked by religious and psychological-linguistic experts."

The Police also "found in the building of the Church printing press of the publisher, Umit-Nadezhda (Hope), which printed religious materials without appropriate permission of the State Agency for Religious Affairs."

Allegations denied

Church lawyer Nurbayeva, as well as Church members Sorokin, Tatyana Zhukova and Shakindyk Uysimbayev, denied any harm to Almenova's health caused by the Church. They told Forum 18 that they heard that two sisters of Almenova put her against her will in a psychiatric hospital in 2011 for three months. They say Almenova thus lost her rights to their flat, after which the two sisters sold it. Almenova had earlier refused to sign the documents allowing the sale.

They add that Almenova twice visited the Church after the raid. She told fellow Church members that she was put in psychiatric hospital by her sisters and the flat was sold, and she is now renting a flat of her own.

Zhukova, a Grace Church member for 15 years, describes allegations that the Church administers drugs to its members as "complete rubbish". "We love our pastors and Church, and give tithes out of love," she told Forum 18 on 17 October. "We want to help our church, and people in our community. All these years never a bad thought about our Church has entered my mind."

Uysimbayev, a Church member for 16 years, told Forum 18 on 17 October that "no one forces us to give tithes to the Church, and the drink we receive at Communion is a red-coloured tea sold in practically all the shops in the city." He added that he cannot say anything bad about his Church. He pointed out that the Church had helped him free himself of earlier alcohol dependency.

Earlier pressure

In the months prior to the search and questioning, numerous hostile media articles appeared. Some insisted that the Church's building, a kindergarten in the Soviet period, should be taken away from it and be given for public use again. In an effort to stop the pressure, Pastor Kashumbayev met the local authorities and told them the Church was ready to give up the building, which it had bought, on condition that it be given a new building within the city limits.

"No response came from the authorities but instead this search and interrogations followed," Church lawyer Nurbayeva told Forum 18. "The pastor himself recently suffered a heart attack, and the doctors told him that 90 per cent of his blood vessels are damaged."

New Life Church raided in Oral

New Life Protestant Church in Oral was raided on 12 October, church members told Forum 18. Arriving in the morning, police and other officials carried out a seven-hour search which lasted until the early evening. The raid was led by Senior Investigator Ruslan Kisambayev of West Kazakhstan Regional Police and Police Major Kayrat Galiyev from the same Department's Division of Struggle against Extremism alongside Galimbek Mazhiyev, Chief Specialist of the Regional Department of the ARA.

The search report - seen by Forum 18 - also gives the names of Nurgul Bekgentayeva and Balkiya Seydjanova, the two witnesses

brought along by officials. Though the report does not state their occupation, Gulnara Utelbayeva, the Church's Assistant Pastor, told Forum 18 on 18 October that the two witnesses produced passes with their names on allowing them to enter the Regional Military Conscription Office.

During the search, police confiscated 606 copies of the book "Worthy Answers" in Russian and Kazakh. The Police alleged that the book is banned and contains "extremist" ideas. "When we asked the Police which ideas exactly are extremist in the book, and which authority banned it and when, we received no response," Utelbayeva told Forum 18. "Then we told the Police that we never knew about such a ban, and that they could take away the books if this is so, and that we will not use this book in future." Police also confiscated one copy of "Call to the Great Commission" by Kazakh Protestant Kanat Oryntai uulu.

When the search reports were drawn up, Mazhiyev requested that his name not be included and the police officers satisfied his request, Utelbayeva told Forum 18. She added that Mazhiyev "appeared not to be satisfied" with the results of the search, and asked the Police to "carry on looking for something" in the Church's computers. "But the Police did not do so, since the search was completed, and the reports drawn up and signed."

Does not know

Mazhiyev of the ARA Department told Forum 18 on 18 October that he "does not know" whether or not the books "Worthy Answers" and "Call to the Great Commission" are "extremist" and banned in Kazakhstan. Asked what the purpose of the search was, and what was his part in the search, he began asking about Forum 18 and the correspondent's name, family name, patronymic, exact address of residence, and all phone numbers. Asked why he illegally demanded the Police not to include his name in the reports, he repeated his questions to Forum 18. Asked why he was not answering any questions, Mazhiyev told Forum 18 with what appeared to be a threatening tone: "We will talk to you personally when we meet."

Major Kayrat Galiyev insisted to Forum 18 on 18 October that the search was lawful. "You have seen the copy of the Prosecutor's warrant, everything is explained there." Told that the grounds for the search given in the warrant are Almenova's complaint and asked what Almenova has to do with New Life Church, whether the authorities allege that New Life also administers hallucinogens to its members, Galiyev answered: "Well, we found banned literature during the search."

When Forum 18 insisted with the question, Major Galiyev responded, "I cannot give more information since the investigation continues." He would not explain why Mazhiyev of the ARA gave orders to the Police during the search, and why he and Investigator Kisambayev did not include Mazhiyev's name in the police report.

Asked whether how he or other officials involved in the raid establish that the literature is banned, Galiyev could not say and asked Forum 18 to call the ARA.

"We didn't threaten anyone"

Senior Investigator Glazkov of Astana Police refused to comment on the searches on 17 October, saying that he was busy and referring Forum 18 to the Press Service of Astana Police. Asked why the police have not given the results of blood tests to the Church members, he responded: "It's the secret of the investigation, and I cannot tell you why." When Forum 18 insisted, asking why New Life and Grace Churches are being subjected to searches and accusations, which Church members adamantly deny, Investigator Glazkov responded: "Look, I don't have time to discuss this with you." Asked why the Police used masks, and broke into the Church in a manner Church members found threatening, he adamantly denied this. "We did not threaten anyone, we just made a search."

Samat Tapayev, Deputy of Prosecutor Tlenchiyev of Astana's Almaty District, who sanctioned the raids of New Life and Grace Churches, played down the Churches' concerns. "These were only searches," Tapayev insisted to Forum 18 on 11 October. He said at present no members of either Grace or New Life Churches are being considered as suspects. "We only want to complete a case which was begun last year." However, he did not exclude that charges could be brought at the completion of the investigation.

Asked why the authorities are questioning widely-accepted Church practices - such as Communion and collection of money offerings - and the Grace Church is being accused of giving hallucinogens to its members, Tapayev repeated his previous response. "No one is being accused of any crimes yet." He did not tell Forum 18 when the investigation will end. Tapayev also could not tell Forum 18 why the results of blood tests taken from the Grace Church members were not submitted to them.

On 17 October Tapayev told Forum 18 Prosecutor Tlenchiyev has competence to authorise the search of New Life in Oral. Asked how an individual complaint against a religious community in Astana is related to a different religious community more than a thousand kilometres away, he responded: "I cannot tell you that - it is the secret of the investigation."

Tapayev said that Investigator Kismabayev acted lawfully by inviting Mazhiyev to be present during the New Life search. Asked whether it was lawful for Mazhiyev to request not to include his name in the search reports, and for the Police to do so, Tapayev responded, "I do not know the details of this."

Svetlana Penkova, Press Secretary of the ARA in Astana, insisted to Forum 18 on 18 October that the initiative to search New Life and Grace Churches came from the Prosecutor's Office. However, she could not explain how or why local ARA official Mazhiyev could arrange so that his name was not included in the New Life search report or demand that Investigators continue with the search when it was already concluded and reports drawn up.

Banned books?

Asked whether the book "Worthy Answers" is banned by the authorities, Tapayev responded: "I don't know, you should ask the ARA."

Penkova of the ARA also could not say whether this and the other books allegedly banned as "extremist" have indeed been banned. However, she insisted that all religious books require permission from the ARA and that those that have been approved are listed on the ARA website.

New Censorship Regulations codifying the official prior compulsory censorship of almost all religious literature and objects imposed by the 2011 Religion Law came into force in March 2012. The ARA is the body tasked with conducting the religious censorship (see F18News 8 May 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1698>). (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=1352>.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kazakhstan can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=29>>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Kazakhstan>>.

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