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KAZAKHSTAN: "He needs local state permission to preach"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Officials who raided a Protestant church in Stepnogorsk in Kazakhstan's northern Akmola Region, as the Easter Sunday morning service was finishing, have defended the raid. "The visiting pastor needed permission to preach here," Duman Uvaideldinov of Stepnogorsk police Criminal Investigation Department - who led the raid - insisted to Forum 18 News Service. "He will receive an official warning." The raid followed a visit by a dual-role official of a state-backed "anti-sect" centre and the local Internal Policy Department. Pastor Igor Andreikin and others from New Life Pentecostal Church are also concerned by an apparent attempt to discredit or blackmail them. An unidentified "law-enforcement officer" attempted to send two young women into a sauna session with men from the church, to be closely followed by two ordinary police officers. Both the ordinary police and the KNB secret police have denied to Forum 18 that they had any involvement. Pastor Andreikin told Forum 18 that as "boundaries have been crossed", there is nothing to stop officials planting drugs on church leaders or using other methods of framing them. He told Forum 18 that he was going public on this case to try to stop such methods being used in future.

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Pastor Igor Andreikin and others from New Life Pentecostal Church are also concerned by an apparent attempt by an unknown "law-enforcement agency" to discredit or blackmail them. An unidentified "law-enforcement officer" attempted to send two young women into a sauna session with the Pastor and other men from the church, to be closely followed by police. Both the ordinary police and the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police have denied to Forum 18 that they had any involvement (see below). Pastor Igor Andreikin told Forum 18 that he was going public on this case to try to prevent such methods being used in future.

Raid

Pastor Andreikin - who lives in Temirtau in the central Karaganda [Qaraghandy] Region - visited Stepnogorsk at the invitation of the local New Life congregation and led several Easter worship meetings. He was concluding the Easter Sunday service on 31 March when four police officers raided the church, led by Captain Uvaideldinov of Stepnogorsk Police's Criminal Investigation Department. The other three officers were local officers from the 4th Microdistrict. They were accompanied by Orynbasar Beisenbina, head of the Internal Policy Department at the town's Akimat (local administration).

"Beisenbina began to accuse me of being a missionary and conducting illegal missionary activity," Pastor Andreikin told Forum 18. "She said I was violating the law and needed to be punished." He rejects this accusation, saying he is a duly accredited pastor of his church and that Stepnogorsk New Life Church's charter allows it to invite visitors to preach.

"I explained to the Akimat official and the police officers that I was leading a service in a registered local religious community and was not 'spreading my faith', the Religion Law's definition of 'missionary activity'," Andreikin told Forum 18. "The faith has already been spread in the church. My actions did not constitute a criminal or administrative offence."

However, the police did not listen to his arguments and insisted that he and the church's pastor, Yevgeni Medvedev, had to come to the town police station to write statements. Pastor Andreikin stated that statements should legally be drawn up on the spot if possible, rather than requiring individuals to go to the police station. "But so as not to inflame the situation, Pastor Medvedev and I were forced to submit to the demands of the police Captain and go to the police station and write statements there," Pastor Andreikin told Forum 18.

The two pastors wrote statements, but as the police saw no evidence of any law-breaking, no record of a crime or an offence was drawn up. They were then allowed to leave. Pastor Andreikin told Forum 18 that another church member was also forced to write a statement

Visiting "sects"?

A "religious studies teacher" present at the meeting also wrote a statement. He claimed to Andreikin that he visited all the "sects" in the town "to be able to teach the children better".

Police raided the church following a complaint lodged late the previous evening, 30 March, by Oksana Atamas, the Stepnogorsk representative of the Sana Akmola Religious Studies Consulting Centre based in the regional capital Kokshetau. This is one of Kazakhstan's state-backed "anti-sect" centres (see below). Atamas had attended the Saturday evening service, also led by Pastor Andreikin, and had learned then that he would be preaching at the Sunday service the following morning.

"He needs local state permission to preach"

Police Captain Uvaideldinov of the Criminal Investigation Department told Forum 18 that police raided the meeting following an approach from the Akimat's Internal Policy Department. He made no mention of Atamas and the Sana Centre. "The Pastor was conducting illegal missionary activity," Uvaideldinov insisted to Forum 18 on 15 April. "He needs local state permission to preach." He said Andreikin would be warned, but did not say how or when the warning would happen.

Asked if Pastor Andreikin needs permission to cross the street while he is visiting Stepnogorsk, Captain Uvaideldinov refused to respond. Asked if Stepnogorsk did not have criminals his Criminal Investigation Department should be pursuing, and whether he was embarrassed to be raiding meetings for worship, he responded: "I'm not embarrassed." He then put the phone down.

Acting head of Stepnogorsk Police, Amangeldy Akmagambetov, said that police must respond when they get a request from an individual. "We go nowhere without a request," he told Forum 18 from Stepnogorsk on 16 April. "If there was a violation, the Pastor is likely to end up with a warning. We sent the material to the Prosecutor's Office."

But Akmagambetov insisted church members should not be concerned. "It's not that serious - maybe there was some misunderstanding. Don't be worried."

"He was conducting illegal missionary activity"

Beisenbina of the Akimat's Internal Policy Department defended her actions against New Life Church. "Our actions were correct - they had a visitor leading the service," she told Forum 18 from Stepnogorsk on 10 April. "He was conducting illegal missionary activity - he needs permission from the Agency for Religious Affairs (ARA) Department for Akmola Region."

Asked why a religious community cannot invite who they like to lead a meeting or address worshippers, Beisenbina responded: "We have the Religion Law." Asked why individuals and communities cannot enjoy freedom of speech and freedom of religion enshrined in Kazakhstan's Constitution and in its international human rights obligations, she replied: "They have freedom of speech and religion, but not if it is against the law."

Asked if Pastor Andreikin would face punishment if he spoke on a visit to Stepnogorsk about football, Beisenbina insisted that he had conducted a service. "And that was illegal."

Beisenbina told Forum 18 that she herself is a religious believer, but declined to say if her religious community had ever been raided by police and what she would think were that to happen.

"It was purely my initiative"?

Atamas of the Sana Centre insisted that she had filed the complaint to the police as "a citizen and a civic activist", but she admitted that she is also a contract employee of the Internal Policy Department under Beisenbina. (Her role is to work with Stepnogorsk's young people.) "But it [the complaint] was purely my initiative," she told Forum 18 on 10 April.

Atamas insisted she had complained to the police "because there had been illegality there - the visiting pastor needed Akimat permission". Asked why she was concerned about whether or not Pastor Andreikin had permission to speak at a meeting of a registered church of his own denomination, she insisted: "Because the youth could suffer." She declined to explain how young people might suffer.

Asked why she had attended New Life Church, Atamas said she went there twice. "I was interested, because young people go there."

Crime?

Changes in 2011 to the Religion Law introduced many new restrictions on freedom of religion or belief which violate Kazakhstan's international human rights obligations. Amongst them are tight new restrictions on those the Law describes without great clarity as "missionaries", who need permission to share their faith (see F18News 23 September 2011)

<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1617>). Those who spread their faith or even discuss their faith with others without approval face administrative prosecution. Fines of up to 100 Monthly Financial Indicators (MFIs) - currently equivalent to nearly two months' average wages as measured nationwide by the state - for vaguely defined "offences" are frequent (see eg. 18 March 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1814>).

Other "offences" which have attracted official hostility and punishments - including a court ordering book burning - are possessing or distributing religious literature without state permission (see eg. F18News 14 March 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1813>). The book burning order has subsequently been cancelled, but their possessor has still been fined (see F18News 10 April 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1822>).

A proposed new Criminal Code - due to reach Parliament "by July" according to the General Prosecutor's Office - would introduce new criminal offences, including "carrying out of missionary activity without [state] registration", with a maximum penalty for local people of four months' jail (see F18News 18 March 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1814>).

New Life Church members insist to Forum 18 that, when one of their pastors visits another New Life Church in another city to lead a worship meeting in a church building owned by the congregation, this does not constitute "missionary activity".

"I was shocked"

Pastor Andreikin said that, after the March police raid, he looked at the Sana Centre's website. "Speaking frankly, I was shocked," he told Forum 18. He was concerned that only the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church are identified as "traditional faiths". He was also concerned that among beliefs listed as "neo-Christian" are the White Brotherhood and the Moonies. [The Christian faith is incompatible with these beliefs.] Andreikin also pointed to an article by Sana's Director Gulnara Orazbayeva, where she describes Pentecostal Christians as a "destructive new religious movement".

Pastor Andreikin pointed out that neither his New Life Church nor many of the other communities Sana identifies as "destructive" - including the Protestant Grace Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Hare Krishna community - are listed on the ARA's website as "destructive" religious communities. Orazbayeva of Sana has previously struggled to justify her views in any detail to Forum 18 (see F18News 6 May 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1568>).

State-backed "anti-sect" centre

Head of the Internal Policy Department Beisenbina refused to discuss with Forum 18 Atamas' role in her Department, or the extent of state involvement in the activities of the Sana Centre. Sana Director Orazbayeva and Atamas both separately stated to Forum 18 that Sana receives state funding.

The Stepnogorsk Akimat website noted on 18 March a joint lecture by Beisenbina and Atamas about the "dangers" of "non-traditional religious organisations" to students of the town's Industrial Technical College No. 2. "Non-traditional religious organisations bring a destructive influence on the psychic and physical state of an individual, as well as destroying the family, society and the state," the website summarises Beisenbina's remarks.

Sana was described as providing "help" in Akmola Region to those "who have been subjected to psychological violence and negative influence from non-traditional religious organisations".

Sana is also a member of the government-backed Association of Centres for Work with Victims of Destructive Religious Movements, led by Yulia Denisenko. She disrupted a service of Christian Family Centre, a Protestant Church in Lisakovsk in the north-western Kostanai [Qostanay] Region in October 2012 (see F18News 24 October 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1758>). Denisenko is prominent in the ARA's efforts to establish "anti-sect" centres (see F18News 29 February 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1673>)

Decree

A Joint Decree - approved by the General Prosecutor's Office and the Culture Ministry on 24 September 2010 and by the Interior Ministry on 7 October 2010 - requires Centres for Work with Victims of Destructive Religious Movements to report monthly information from victims to the government's then Religious Affairs Committee (predecessor of the current ARA).

The Joint Decree also required summaries of complaints to be provided within "no more than five working days" to the General Prosecutor's Office for it to carry out oversight and to the Interior Ministry for it to conduct "further measures". Results of inspections resulting from these measures were to be reported to the Religious Affairs Committee for it to inform Kazakhstan's Security Council.

At the same time the Decree was issued, the ruling Nur Otan Party circulated an internal report strongly backing the work of the alleged Centres for Work with Victims of Destructive Religious Movements. A Party official insisted to Forum 18 that the report

was the view of only one party researcher who has since been sacked, even though the report echoed official actions (see F18News 30 September 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1493>).

Attempt to smear or blackmail?

On Saturday evening, 30 March, Pastor Medvedev and his son Rodion, together with Pastor Andreikin and five other church members - all men - had arranged a visit to the local sauna. Pastor Medvedev later discovered that before their arrival, a man who claimed to be from an unnamed "law-enforcement agency" had visited the sauna to try to persuade the sauna staff to allow in two young women when the church members were alone in the sauna.

"This officer several times stressed that a very important operation was underway," Pastor Medvedev told Forum 18. "He said he knew who had booked the sauna for this time and that he knew that only men would be there. He gave the names and nicknames of the prostitutes."

Sauna staff told the man that children would be there and that the sauna's clients could lodge a complaint to the police. However, the "law-enforcement agency" man told sauna staff that the "most important thing was to let the girls in and that they should be able to take off all their clothes. And after that, two police officers will arrive."

Two young women were on the street outside when the church members arrived, Pastor Medvedev told Forum 18. But the sauna staff did not let them in. The women telephoned someone and passed the phone through the window to the sauna staff, but the staff continued to prevent them from entering.

"I believe there are certain 'third forces' who are seeking any possibility to discredit us before the public of Kazakhstan and the international society," Pastor Medvedev insisted to Forum 18.

Pastor Andreikin told Forum 18 that "if there are in our country certain 'third forces', as many eye-witnesses have told us, I have a great fear for my own safety and the safety of other church leaders." He fears that given that "boundaries have been crossed", there is nothing to stop officials planting drugs on church leaders or using other methods of framing them. He stated that he was going public on this case to try to prevent such methods be used in future.

"KNB officers didn't go to the sauna"

Told about the apparent attempt to smear or blackmail church members at the sauna on 30 March, Acting Head of Stepnogorsk ordinary Police Akmagambetov laughed. "Our service was not involved in such a thing," he insisted to Forum 18. "Maybe some other service was involved." Asked if he meant the KNB secret police, he declined to comment.

The Deputy Head of Stepnogorsk KNB secret police, who gave his name only as Baurzhan, insisted that he was hearing about the 30 March events at the sauna "for the first time" from Forum 18. "But I can tell you categorically that KNB officers didn't go to the sauna," he told Forum 18 from Stepnogorsk on 15 April.

He said that to be able to answer Forum 18's further questions on the events, Forum 18 would have to come to Stepnogorsk and lodge an official request. "You must apply to us in accordance with the legally-established methods."

Surveillance

A number of prominent members of religious communities the government does not like are known to be monitored. Several are also on criminal investigation lists despite the fact that they have never been prosecuted or investigated on administrative or criminal charges (see forthcoming F18News article).

Pastor Andreikin travelled to the United States in March on a US State Department-funded visit with two other Kazakh religious leaders and the head of a government-backed "anti-sect" centre. He told Forum 18 that although he had mentioned nothing about it to them, officials of the Temirtau Akimat's Internal Policy Department appeared well informed about his participation in the visit.

All religious communities are thought to be under surveillance by the ordinary police and KNB secret police (see eg. F18News 29 February 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1673>). Many communities are reluctant to discuss this - including KNB attempts to recruit informers - for fear of state reprisals (see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1352>). There are also open attempts by the authorities to gather intrusive information (see eg. F18News 24 November 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1638>). (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>>.

Felix Corley, contributed this comment to Forum 18 News Service. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

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f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY