



This article was published by F18News on: 27 August 2009

KAZAKHSTAN: "Such preaching is prohibited by our law"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Within hours of arriving in the town of Uspen to visit a local Christian and set up a local congregation, police broke into the house where members of the Pavlodar Grace Church were staying, church members told Forum 18 News Service. One visitor was questioned and a local woman the visitors had prayed with was beaten by police until she signed a statement saying she had been forced to submit to a religious ritual. Two of the visitors face administrative trial on 31 August. Asked why the Police targeted the group, Inspector Nurserik Aytzhanov told Forum 18: "They were imposing their religion on the residents of the town by saying that 'Jesus Christ is the only God and you must believe in him'." Asked what was wrong with sharing one's beliefs with others, he said: "Such preaching is prohibited by our law." He denied that police beat anyone. Police in Jambeyt likewise denied to Forum 18 that they beat one of ten visiting Baptists they detained.

Three cases since the beginning of August - all against various Protestant churches - illustrate the efforts of Anti-Terror Police, ordinary Police and prosecutors to try to prevent individuals and religious communities from sharing their faith and gaining new adherents, Forum 18 News Service notes. Local Christians in the town of Uspen in north-eastern Pavlodar Region were beaten and forced by local Police and Prosecutor's Office officials to write complaints against visiting members of the officially registered Grace Presbyterian Church of Pavlodar. The authorities accused the Church of "illegal" missionary activity and "coercing" people to perform a religious rite, the church's lawyer told Forum 18. Two church members face administrative trial on 31 August.

Police photographed and fingerprinted ten unregistered Baptists in Jambeyt in West Kazakhstan Region after they tried to preach their faith in the town, and beat one of them. Also fingerprinted was the pastor of a registered Nazarene Protestant Church in Atyrau Region after he was summoned and interrogated "for no specific reason" by Atyrau Anti-Terror Police, as he complained to Forum 18. He also said the local National Security Committee (KNB) secret police "kept close tabs" on him.

In each case, local officials denied to Forum 18 pressure on the Protestants and in Uspen and Jambeyt denied allegations of police brutality.

Officials at the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee in Astana refused to comment on any of the cases. Both Ardak Doszhan the Chair of the Committee, and Amanbek Mukhashev, one of the Deputy Chairs, hung up the phone as soon as they heard Forum 18's question on 25 August why the Police in those regions harassed the church members. Spreading one's faith is not illegal in Kazakhstan, though it would have become so had the Constitutional Council not rejected the controversial and highly restrictive proposed new Religion Law in February 2009 (see F18News 17 March 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1269>).

Raids and pressure on religious communities by Police Departments for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism are common in Kazakhstan (see F18News 10 July 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1325>). The authorities also routinely clamp down on individuals and religious communities who try to share their faith.

Independent Muslims, Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees have been particular targets of the government's tight and increasing controls on religious activity in recent years.

Police use force to extract false testimony against church visitors

Police took immediate action against four members of Grace Presbyterian Church in the city of Pavlodar in north-eastern Kazakhstan - Yelena Tsai, Yuliya Weber, Ramil Imankulov and Kayrat Zhangozhin - when they arrived on 5 August in the nearby town of Uspen "in order to organise a branch of the church," Grace Church members told Forum 18. Local church member Valentina Fishcheva invited them "temporarily" to stay in her home.

The same evening at around 10.30 pm, local Police Inspector Nurserik Aytzhanov and two persons in plain clothes broke into Fishcheva's home "without any authorisation" and searched it. Inspector Aytzhanov "illegally seized" the identity documents of the church members "without presenting a warrant" to do so.

The Inspector told the church members that charges for "illegal" missionary activity were being brought against them. Zhangozhin was taken to the Uspen District Police and questioned for several hours before being released, church members told Forum 18.

The following day, on 6 August, when the Pavlodar Church's Pastor, Aleksandr Tsoi, was submitting a complaint against the actions of Inspector Aytzhanov, the Uspen District Prosecutor Kanat Atygayev told him that administrative charges were being brought against his church members for "illegal" missionary activity. Prosecutor Atygayev had Pastor Tsoi read a statement by Safura Mil, an Uspen resident, stating that she was prayed for by the Grace Church members whom she met while she was visiting Fishcheva's home at her own request, church members told Forum 18.

On 7 August the Uspen Police "forcefully brought Mil to Prosecutor Atygayev's office - which was seen by neighbours - where she was forced to write a slanderous statement against Zhangozhin and Imankulov 'for coercing Mil to perform a religious rite'," church members told Forum 18, "after which Prosecutor Atygayev opened an administrative case."

Church members said Mil had told them that since 5 August she has been beaten several times at the Police Station and the Police forced her to write the complaint. They added that Mil said that her family members were also beaten to force them to write complaints against the church.

However, Inspector Aytzhanov did not stop what church members call his "unlawful actions". On 16 August, eleven days after he broke into her home the first time, he brought Fishcheva to the District Police, where he pressured her to write a complaint saying that she did not want the Grace Church members to stay in her home. He told her that if she did not sign the complaint her husband would be arrested. Fishcheva gave in to the pressure and signed the complaint, church members told Forum 18, after which the Inspector told her that he would come by in the evening to drive out the Protestants and confiscate all the literature.

Mil left Uspen and at the moment is "hiding for fear of the Uspen Police". On 19 August she wrote a complaint to the Pavlodar Regional Prosecutor's Office asking them "to defend her from the Uspen Police," church members said.

Arman Khasenov of the Regional Prosecutor's office told Forum 18 on 25 August that they have received two complaints, one of 18 August from Fishcheva against the action of Uspen District Prosecutor and another of a later date from Mil against the actions of Inspector Aytzhanov. "Fishcheva's complaint was referred back to the Uspen District Prosecutor's office for investigation as the procedure requires," Khasenov responded, "and Mil's complaint was referred to the Internal Security Division of Uspen District Police."

Inspector Aytzhanov denied the allegations altogether. "No one has beaten Mil, and I don't know why she has left the town," he told Forum 18 on 24 August. Asked why the Police targeted the group, he said: "They were imposing their religion on the residents of the town by saying that 'Jesus Christ is the only God and you must believe in him'." Asked what was wrong with sharing one's beliefs with others, Aytzhanov said: "Such preaching is prohibited by our law." He did not clarify where exactly it said so in the law.

Asked what prompted him to start an investigation against the Protestants, Aytzhanov said: "I had the information that Grace Church members had arrived, and were involved in missionary activity." Asked if the local authorities had anything against the Grace Church, he responded: "I needed to collect the preliminary materials for the investigation, and I have already passed the materials to the Prosecutor." He refused to discuss the case further.

Also denying allegations of Police brutality was Prosecutor Atygayev. Asked by Forum 18 on 24 August why Police beat local residents and pressured them to write complaints against the church members, he responded: "You were given wrong information." He refused to discuss the case further, insisting he needed to investigate it further.

Church members still face prosecution

Prosecutors brought a case against two of the visitors from the Pavlodar Church, Imankulov and Zhangozhin, under Article 375 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences. This wide-ranging article punishes "violation of the laws on religion", including a provision to punish "forcing individuals to conduct religious rites or participate in other religious activity", with a fine for individuals of up to 20 times the minimum monthly wage and the banning of a religious organisation.

During the hearing in the Uspen District Court on 19 August, Pastor Tsoi of the Pavlodar Church challenged Judge Yersyn Kozhaberginov, who led the case, for being partial. He insisted that the case should be heard by a higher court. It was sent to Pavlodar Regional Court on 20 August, Judge Kozhaberginov told Forum 18. He refused to discuss why the two men were being prosecuted.

However, the Regional Court refused to hear the case and returned it to the lower court which, according to the church's lawyer, Kaukhar Ayseyeva, is due to hear it on 31 August.

Ayseyeva insisted to Forum 18 on 25 August that the activity of Zhangozhin and Imankulov in Uspen is authorised, since they were sent there from the Pavlodar Grace Church. The Pavlodar Church is a founding member of the Kazakhstan Centre for Grace Church,

which has registration covering the whole of the country. "The court is trying to punish our believers for allegedly coercing local residents to perform a religious rite," she complained.

The Grace Church has faced repeated raids and pressure across the whole country and a ban on its senior pastor - a US citizen - from entering the country (see F18News 30 January 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1078>).

Baptists photographed and fingerprinted, literature confiscated

Meanwhile, in West Kazakhstan Region, ten members of the Oral (Uralsk) City Council of Churches Baptist Church were detained on 7 August while visiting the town of Jambeyt in Syrym District to share their faith with residents, local Baptists told Forum 18.

"Soon after they started the evangelism at 1 pm some of the believers were arrested, and brought to the local police station," the Baptists said. The rest of the group were stopped and taken to the station at 5.30 pm. Police Captain Y. Shuraliyev under the guidance of Gizat Kubashev, Deputy Chief of Syrym District Police, questioned the Baptists - S. Krasnov, G. Pryakhin, K. Batimov, N. Naumov, V. Nelepin, I. Isayev, R. Nasyrova, N. Budanova, N. Maksina, G. Novikova - and drew up an official record on each, Baptists told Forum 18. All the Christian literature was confiscated from the church members.

"Police officers present in the process were very rude, and one officer several times hit brother Naumov," the Baptists complained. "The believers were released several hours later after their photographs and fingerprints were taken."

Deputy Police Chief Kubashev told Forum 18 that the Baptists are being investigated for unregistered religious activity (Council of Churches Baptists refuse on principle to register with the state authorities). However, he denied that his officers were rude and hit Naumov. "Nothing like that happened," he claimed to Forum 18 on 24 August. Asked why the Police fingerprinted the Baptists, Kubashev responded: "We fingerprint anyone who is arrested and brought to the Police station."

Kubashev said the investigation has not finished, but complained that the Baptists had failed to return for further questioning. He refused to say what further action he was going to take against them. "Let them come, and I will talk to them," he said. "I cannot tell you about that over the phone."

Anti-Terror Police harass Atyrau pastor

In Atyrau Region of south-western Kazakhstan, Valeri Sudorgin, the Pastor of Atyrau City Nazarene Protestant Church, is also facing harassment. On 17 August he was summoned to Atyrau City Anti-Terror Police, where he was questioned, photographed, fingerprinted and then released. "Police officer Amantai, who did not give a last name, asked me to bring with me the church's charter and the list of church members," Sudorgin told Forum 18 on 24 August. The questioning lasted one and half hours, he added.

"Officer Amantai asked questions like 'where I was born,' 'where I came from,' 'how I became a pastor,' 'who opened the church,' 'where do the church members work,' 'how much they earn,' 'how much in offerings are collected in the church,' 'where we get funds,' 'on what means I survive,' whether there are members with court convictions,' 'whether we distribute religious literature,' 'where we get the literature from,' 'whether we hold meetings for a wider public,' 'whether we compel ethnic Kazakhs to convert to Christianity," Sudorgin told Forum 18.

He said Amantai forced him to give written answers. "He also pressured me to give a written commitment to notify the Police about my movement inside and outside Kazakhstan," he complained. Later Sudorgin was taken to another room at the Police, and his photograph and fingerprints were taken. "I felt like a criminal," he lamented.

Sudorgin insisted to Forum 18 he would not have provided written answers had the police not put "psychological pressure" on him. "I want to honestly confess that I - as a citizen of Kazakhstan - do not know my rights, and the officer is also to blame as he did not explain to me my rights," he complained.

Officer Amantai identified himself when reached on 24 August, but hung up the phone as soon as Forum 18 asked why Sudorgin had been interrogated.

Secret police surveillance

Sudorgin also told Forum 18 that he used to work as an assistant of the church's pastor, a South Korean missionary, whose visa was not extended by the authorities and had to leave Kazakhstan on 23 May. He said in April or May a KNB secret police officer named Salamat started visiting the church. "Salamat wrote down my phone number then, asked me to meet him several times, which I did. Each time he asked me for information about our church," Sudorgin said. "He probably knew that I would become the new pastor of the church if the Korean pastor left."

Sudorgin said he had earlier that day (24 August) met the KNB officer and told him that he would "no longer meet with him".

Officer Salamat, who did not give his last name, denied Sudorin's allegations to Forum 18. "Why should I meet with him?" he asked Forum 18 on 24 August. "No one is pressuring him to give any information." (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>.

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 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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