

Persecuted Christian Dashes From Prison to Border

For 90 days last fall, Makset Djabbarbergenov lived in a Kazakh prison cell, under threat of deportation to his native Uzbekistan to face almost-certain years of harsh jail time.

His alleged crime: Leading small Christian communities in **house churches** without official registration. By 2007, this had made “Pastor Makset” a wanted criminal, and he fled across the border into Kazakhstan to escape arrest. By 2009, he and his family had won refugee status there from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR. So far, Kazakhstan has refused to recognize the family’s refugee status.

Last year, Uzbekistan bumped up the convert pastor’s “criminal accusations” to charges of terrorism, and demanded the Kazakh government send him back home to face trial and a potential 15-year prison sentence.

His pregnant wife, Aygul, and their four young sons were left watching wide-eyed as the Kazakh police arrested him in their Almaty home at noon on Sept. 5. It would be three months before they saw each other again.

In late December, a few weeks after they had flown to safety and a new life in Europe, they told the story of their family’s faith ordeal in a series of interviews with World Watch Monitor. Their location is being withheld to preserve their security.

Always, the dream was the same.

“Ever since I became a Christian nearly 13 years ago, I kept

having this dream that I was being chased by people trying to capture me, and every time I would escape.”

Makset looked out the frosty apartment window. Fresh snow covered the street outside.

Always the same dream, he said, until one day in September.

“The day before I was arrested in Almaty, when I again dreamed about being chased, this time I got caught.”

It was his wife, however, who first realized it was about to happen.

It was Sept. 3. Aygul’s cell phone rang. The number was unfamiliar. Someone on the other end was saying her sister was being held by the police for using a stolen mobile phone. He was asking her to come to the station.

Aygul had no official identification to get her into the police station. So, she arranged with her grown niece to go together. On the morning of Sept. 5, Aygul stayed in the car, praying, while her niece went in to see her mother.

That’s when the police swarmed around the car and ordered Aygul inside. Questioning her for 45 minutes, they ordered her to write down all her contact information, and then took her fingerprints and some photos.

“Now we need your husband,” they announced. Quickly, she called Makset before the police escorted her back home.

She broke into tears as the police took him away. “Oh, we just want his fingerprints!” they said, sounding glib. For the rest of the day, she said, “Our oldest son kept calling me during every break at school, worried and asking if his Dad had come back yet.”

At 5 p.m., her phone rang again. This time, it was Makset.

"This is very serious. Call everyone you can. Tell them what is happening to me."

Then, nothing. The police took his phone. It was the last Aygul would hear from her husband for six days.

Through tears, Aygul started calling everywhere for help: the UNHCR office in Almaty, members of their Almaty church, and Christian friends all around Central Asia.

Within two days, the UNHCR staff confirmed to her that Uzbekistan was insisting Makset be extradited for trial. On Sept. 7, she learned a Kazakh court had remanded him earlier that day to prison for 40 days, while his case was under review.

"The first day they wanted to beat me, and the police were very rude to me," Makset said, "but they didn't mistreat me physically."

"Those first days after my arrest were the hardest," he said. "It was an emotional time, and everything hit into my heart. I was joyful on the outside, but I was very stressed inside. I was thinking about my family: What will happen to our children if I'm sent to Uzbekistan?"

And in answer, he said, he heard God in his prayers: *I will not send you back to Uzbekistan.*

Back in Touch

He spent three days in police detention, and three more in health quarantine. Once he arrived at the immigration prison, he managed to borrow a smuggled cell phone and call Aygul.

She asked if he had received the clothes and food parcels she had registered and sent to him through jail officials. He hadn't.

"I went home and cried, I was so upset," she said.

It wasn't long before Makset's own cell phone was slipped in to him, enabling him to make brief but frequent calls to Aygul and the children. It was a vital link, since the prison refused to allow her any visiting rights.

But as the weeks went by, turning into months, Makset admitted it was hard to keep focused on God's promise when everyone around him was sure he would be sent to Uzbekistan.

"My fears kept building up. I knew it was Satan, trying to make this fear in my heart. So I told him, 'I have this letter from my God here in my hand, the Bible. Your words never came true in the Bible. You are the father of lies!' "

During the first week in the common prison, Makset read from an old version of the Kazakh Bible that had been secreted in one of the cell's several hiding places. Later, a pocket edition of the modern Kazakh Bible was smuggled in to him, which he kept hidden in his own corner.

At first, he said, he asked God, "Please show miracles to the men around me here." But as he began to pore over his Bible, spending sometimes four or five hours or more every afternoon behind the blankets draped around his bed, he said God showed him there was another reason he was in prison.

"Instead, God showed me that it was me He wanted to show His face to. He was telling me that He could trust me, like Job, to go through this persecution. It was not just for the people around me, the authorities, the 10 or 11 other prisoners in my cell. God wanted me to see His power."

During his three months behind bars, he read 22 books of the Old Testament and 10 of the New Testament, keeping a detailed journal of all the things God was teaching him as he read and prayed. A dozen books were sent in to him openly through prison officials, who apparently did not realize they were religious in nature.

One book told how a Chinese house church flourished and grew for 21 years, while all that time their pastor was sitting in jail.

“Persecution causes the spread of the church. It’s the key to growth,” he concluded. “So I told Jesus then, ‘If this is the way to grow Your church, I am willing to sit here in this prison.’”

Anywhere But Uzbekistan

The UN told Aygul it had no funds to hire a lawyer. Close Christian friends raised funds to secure an ethnic Russian lawyer experienced in representing refugees in Kazakhstan. He was less than hopeful.

“‘I am not at all sure I will be successful. So it may be useless to hire me,’ ” Aygul recalled him saying at their first meeting.

She told him she didn’t believe him. “ ‘We believe in God, and He will help us,’ ” she responded.

Hopeful or not, the lawyer was the only person allowed to visit Makset in prison; even the local UNHCR representatives were stonewalled by jail authorities.

“He was my only visitor, and he came just a few times. And he was usually discouraging,” Makset said. “But at least,” he smiled, “I enjoyed the long walk I got to take from my cell to

meet with him.”

Meanwhile, Makset and Aygul continued their furtive phone calls. By the end of September, they had agreed they would accept asylum abroad, if the UNHCR could help arrange it. Even then, they had no guarantee that the Kazakh government would ignore Uzbekistan’s demands and actually allow Makset to go to another country.

But the UNHCR was not sure the couple were serious. Makset had been arrested by Kazakh police and badly beaten in 2008; through the UNHCR, Sweden and the United States offered the family asylum.

“It would be good for your children,” they urged him at the time. “They are offering you citizenship there if you leave.”

“But I had just started a church,” Makset remembered thinking to himself. “I was tempted, and I had a one-month deadline to accept it. But after I prayed and fasted, I chose to stay, and fruit came: We baptized 50 new believers in the next few years. ”

So when the UNHCR asked him this second time, he again prayed, asking God, “Then who will lead the church here, if I leave?” He heard God’s answer clearly: *It’s not your church, it’s Mine*. This time, he said, he knew he was leaving behind an established congregation with a team of church leaders.

Their decision made, the paperwork began. The UNHCR managed in October to send Makset papers through the lawyer to sign, agreeing they would accept asylum, wherever it was offered, with one exception.

“Anywhere but Uzbekistan,” they said.

The process dragged.

"It seemed like my time in prison would never end," Makset said. "I doubted God's promise almost every day, all those weeks." But he always heard God speaking to him, he said, "answering my doubts with promise after promise."

After a Long Silence

Finally, when Aygul was informed on Nov. 7 that Sweden had offered them asylum, she broke down and cried for joy in the UNHCR office. It was the answer to the first of their prayers: Which country will accept us?

But it still left answered their second prayer: Will Kazakhstan actually let us leave?

"I was instructed not to tell anyone, for Makset's safety, because if people found out, it could make it difficult to get him out of prison," Aygul said. She couldn't even tell Makset, except indirectly. "Our lawyer found out later, when he took in the papers Makset had to sign, to agree for our amnesty visas. But we didn't tell him any details, how we were doing it."

It was all carefully choreographed. The High Commissioner for Refugees didn't approach Sweden until Makset and Aygul had agreed to accept asylum. He didn't approach the Kazakh government until Sweden had made its offer. And now, the commissioner was demanding that Aygul tell no one.

"I was so grateful to God," she said. "But I didn't dare tell our kids, so I had to keep it a secret from them and our friends until just two days before we were scheduled to leave. And even then, they knew we were leaving, but not where we were going."

"But even after I knew that Sweden had accepted me," Makset admitted, "I was not really sure that I would ever leave the

prison safely. Would the Kazakh government really release me?"

The Final Stretch

There was still no answer to that question three weeks later. By the last week of November, Aygul cried out to God in frustration. "Lord, I have no more strength!" she prayed, again in tears. "I am ready to give up."

Then a call came from the UNHCR on Friday, Nov. 30. She walked into the head office at noon, unsure just what she might hear. Good news? Or more delays? "The Kazakh government has just agreed to release Makset from prison, and to allow us to escort him and your family safely out of the country," the official announced, looking pleased.

Makset isn't entirely sure why Kazakhstan decided to set him free. But a likely factor, he suspects, was the widespread international outrage after June 2011 when the Kazakh government deported 28 Uzbeks back to Tashkent, where they were likely to be jailed and tortured. Rebuked for their clear violation of international law and agreements they had signed, the Kazakh authorities promised to not repeat it.

Warning that Uzbek officials might try to kidnap Makset as he left prison and whisk him across the border, the UNHCR advised Aygul to wait a few more days, until the night of Dec. 4, a Tuesday, when they would walk him out of prison and through the Almaty airport with his family in a few quick hours.

The U.N. officials admitted they "couldn't really be sure it is going to work" until Makset was actually out of prison, through the airport immigration checkpoint and on the airplane flying out of Kazakhstan airspace.

But time was short at noon that Friday, if Aygul was going to get an exit visa issued in time to leave on Tuesday. With the weekend and then a Monday holiday just ahead, she needed to

get the required permits for herself and the children before government offices closed Friday afternoon. "It was no small miracle to get our exit visa that fast, to be able to leave on Tuesday," she said.

Aygul kept her secret until Monday, Dec., 3. Then, guarding her words carefully, she told Makset over his mobile phone that he would be released the next day from prison, and that UNHCR security officials would be waiting to meet him.

A 24-Hour Whirl

"On the morning of Dec. 4, nobody came. Nothing happened," Makset said. He had given away his extra clothes and other items to his cellmates, and packed the rest to take with him.

"I waited until lunch time, and then I started to doubt. It was 1 p.m., and still nothing. I was waiting for the guards to come and take me to the head department, to sign papers and then get my certificate of release."

He knew that under prison procedures, a prisoner had to be processed before 4 p.m. to be released that same day. "But the afternoon wore on," he said, "and I was still waiting."

He still had his phone, and he dialled Aygul. "Where are they? When will they come?" Before she could answer, he heard the cell door opening. "Immediately I threw my phone away to hide it, so the guards would not see it," he said.

Smiling broadly, the police clerk walked in and demanded, "Give me a celebration gift!" Waving a paper, he asked Makset, "Do you know what your news is?" After reading from it, he announced solemnly, "You can go home." Already packed, Makset just picked up his things and followed the clerk out of the cell.

"At the administration office where I had to sign some papers, the prosecutor was clearly upset. He had lost his battle to keep me in prison," he said. "Then I was taken to the head of the prison department to sign still more papers in front of her. But before I left her office, she told the guards to go ahead of me to the outside gate, to check who was waiting there.

"Who is waiting for me?" he asked quickly, his heart pounding. "The government of Uzbekistan!" she replied.

Was it a joke? "I believed her, and I was really afraid," Makset said. "Was that why they were leading me to a side entrance of the prison, instead of out the main gate? Maybe they had arranged to 'release' me, but into the hands of someone waiting outside to kidnap me.

"When I got to the final exit," he said, "I had to show my papers one last time. In the distance on one side of the gate, I saw a woman waving and shouting at me, but I couldn't recognize her at first." Emerging from the dark interior, he squinted at the bright lights reflecting off the snow.

Finally he recognized her: the woman who had processed all his UN documents over the past years. The three UNHCR security officials with her rushed him into one of their two cars and drove straight to their office.

"I waited there several hours until Aygul and the children arrived. It was like a dream to see them all again," he said, shaking his head. "Lots of people were around, so I didn't cry there," content to wrap his arms around them and hug them.

"Our two-year-old son Arman was sound asleep when they arrived," he said. "When he woke up later at the airport and saw me, he was confused and not sure that I was really his daddy."

"Look, Murat," Aygul said to their oldest son, "our God has delivered your father from prison!" Murat nodded and replied matter-of-factly, "Of course, because we prayed for him every night."

The Last Tense Minutes

At midnight, the UN officials drove them directly to the airport, where more than 50 believers with their children were waiting inside to see them off. "I had wanted a week to say goodbye to them all, but in the end, I only had 15 minutes," Makset said.

But even then, the UNHCR escorts were nervous about the noise and attention he was getting. "Everyone came to hug me and say goodbye, so they were worried that the KGB might react."

The couple quickly called their families in Nukus, the capital of Uzbekistan's autonomous Karakalpakstan region, to give them the news that Makset was free. "This was the first they knew that our entire family was leaving for resettlement in Europe," Aygul said. "They were so relieved."

They decided that Aygul and the children should go first through passport control, since they had valid passports, although no residence visas. Makset waited until they were stamped out of Kazakhstan to follow them.

The officials asked for his passport. "I don't have one," he told them. "I just got out of jail."

"Startled, they asked me to wait and called over their supervisors. I watched my family walk on to board the plane, and swallowed hard, wondering what would happen."

"What border did you come in?" the immigration officials asked. "I came in illegally," he replied. Then they called over someone else, started searching on the computers, and

talked among themselves.

“Finally, they came back and stamped my papers,” Makset said. But just as he started to walk on, they stopped him.

“You are banned from returning to Kazakhstan for five years, until 2017,” they announced.

“My heart sank. I was so disappointed. But then I thought immediately, ‘Maybe it is Your will, Lord, for safety.’ As the UNHCR officials walked me all the way to the airplane, they said I should not try to visit any of the Central Asian countries again until after 2017. ‘All of their intelligence agencies work together,’ they explained, ‘so you are wanted everywhere because of Uzbekistan.’ ”

Makset settled himself with his family on the plane, which left Almaty at 2:30 in the morning. “We knew by then that the plane would stop over in Astana (the capital of Kazakhstan) before flying on to Germany. So the UNHCR had warned us that possibly Uzbek authorities could try to stop me there. But we didn’t change planes, and no one came aboard.

“I was so keyed up that I couldn’t sleep at all on the flight on to Frankfurt,” Makset recalled. When they arrived, they found no one waiting for them. The family spent several hours unattended, waiting for the connecting flight. Arriving in Sweden, they were met by the government’s refugee representatives.

By that time, Aygul was exhausted. She had packed for the move, reunited the kids with their father, and travelled through four airports to their final destination in Sweden, all in 24 hours. But there was still farther to go.

“Lord, where are You taking us?” she remembers praying during the five-hour drive from the airport through the snow and

wind, shivering in the cold darkness. It was nearly 8 p.m. on Wednesday, Dec. 5, as she herded their four sleepy children up the stairs and through the door into a small, furnished apartment in a strange city.

“We still don’t know why we are here. But now we must learn the language, adapt to this climate and culture, and get our health strong again,” said Aygul, who is expecting their fifth baby in April.

Christmas arrived three weeks later. The couple put up bright, handmade decorations and wrapped simple gifts for each of the boys—sock slippers, school notebooks, Play-Doh and a few small toys.

Aygul had prayed that somehow God would bring them all together again as a family for Christmas. “This was such a present for us, and for all of those who were praying for us, too,” she said.

Just before his arrest in September, Makset had been reading about the spiritual needs of the Turkic world, a region of more than 200 million people sharing ethno-linguistic links across Central Asia, Turkey, northwest China, parts of Eastern Europe and large sections of Asia. His world.

“There is so much work to do there for God,” he said. “So I am still asking every day since I arrived in Sweden, ‘Why are we here? And where do we go from here?’ “

Editor’s Note: *Compass Direct News is now Word Watch Monitor.*