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RUSSIA: Moscow Krishna devotees face eviction

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Boxes of property at Moscow's only Hare Krishna temple are packed and labelled in order of priority, so that the congregation's most treasured items can be removed "within 15 minutes if the bulldozers come", the congregation's lawyer, Mikhail Frolov, told Forum 18 News Service. In November 2012, a court ruling ordering the Krishna devotees' eviction from the site came into force. Meanwhile, in May 2013 a Moscow city agency told them that building a new temple at an alternative site they had been allocated in 2007 would be "inexpedient" taking into account the opinions of local residents. Muslims and some Protestants have met similar difficulties acquiring or retaining property in the Russian capital. Pentecostals whose church was bulldozed in September 2012 now have to meet at three separate venues, the pastor told Forum 18. A Moscow city official dealing with religious issues declined to discuss these problems with Forum 18.

Moscow's Krishna devotees may soon be without a home, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Their construction land already confiscated, they now face eviction from their current site.

"We might have to leave at any moment," Public Relations Officer Yuri Pleshakov remarked to Forum 18 on 29 August amid stacks of cardboard boxes at the congregation's offices in northern Moscow. The boxes have been labelled in order of priority, so that the congregation's most treasured items can be removed "within 15 minutes if the bulldozers come," the congregation's lawyer, Mikhail Frolov, added.

Konstantin Blazhenov, Moscow City Government's official dealing with religious issues, declined to comment when reached by Forum 18 on 9 September.

Bulldozed

The Krishna devotees are the latest religious community to be blocked from acquiring and retaining property in the Russian capital. Muslims and some Protestants have met similar difficulties.

A year ago, the city authorities bulldozed a Pentecostal church after failing to honour earlier guarantees that the building would be approved (see below).

Also a year ago, the city authorities cancelled their earlier permission for a new mosque in a Moscow suburb (see F18News 26 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1747).

No further permission for new mosques has been given since then, Gulnur Gaziyeva, press secretary to the Council of Muftis of Russia, told Forum 18 on 5 September.

Moscow currently has only four official mosques, one of which is under reconstruction. Yet 149,000 worshippers attended the end-of-Ramadan festival Eid-ul-Fitr (locally known as Uraza-bairam) on 8 August, Interfax reported. Alleging that only ten per cent of such worshippers are Moscow residents, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin maintained to the independent local radio station Ekho Moskvyy in March that the city's existing mosques are therefore sufficient.

Eviction?

Informally, local officials have said they will "tolerate" the Krishna congregation at their present site until mid-September - or after Moscow's mayoral elections on 8 September - devotees Frolov and Pleshakov told Forum 18. The delay has at least allowed the congregation to observe its two most important annual festivals - honouring the deity Krishna and Krishna Consciousness founder Swami Prabhupada - on 28 and 29 August.

Across from the offices during Forum 18's visit late on 29 August, a marquee sheltered several hundred Krishna devotees as they sang and danced barefoot to mark the close of the celebrations. In the yard outside, others browsed the movement's literature or chatted over milk cocktails.

This worship site lies close to Moscow's main exit road to St Petersburg and Dinamo metro station. It was originally allocated to the Krishna devotees as a temple construction site in 2004, after the community lost its late Soviet-era premises due to city planning. In October 2005, however, Moscow City Government suddenly withdrew its permission for the temple's construction following strong criticism from the Russian Orthodox Church (see F18News 3 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1056).

The Krishna devotees accept they no longer have legal rights to this site. Pleshakov stressed to Forum 18 that the Moscow authorities have been accommodating, allowing the community to remain there until a new temple is constructed on the outskirts of the city. But that agreement was only ever oral, he added.

A 28 March 2012 ruling by Moscow's Savelovsky District Court, seen by Forum 18, orders the eviction of the Krishna devotees from the site at the congregation's expense. This ruling came into force on 12 November 2012, Pleshakov told Forum 18, and the eviction should technically have taken place within a month of that date.

Confiscation

The devotees' shaky existence on the temporary site had seemed unimportant. After the objections to the construction of a temple there, the Moscow authorities allocated the congregation a new construction site beyond the city's ringroad in 2007 (see F18News 26 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1747).

On 4 April 2013, however, a meeting of Moscow City Construction and Land Commission decided to annul the Krishna devotees' legal rights to the new site in Molzhaninovo. According to a 14 May letter from a separate Moscow department informing the congregation of the decision, seen by Forum 18, the location of a temple complex at the site would be "inexpedient" taking into account the opinions of local residents.

Krishna devotee Pleshakov objects: "They gave us that plot of land in the first place because there was no problem in that respect." Despite the state's constant and unrealistic planning deadlines, he said, the congregation had almost reached construction stage, investing into the project tens of millions of Roubles (millions of Norwegian Kroner or hundreds of thousands of Euros or US Dollars). An astrologically determined consecration ceremony attended by Ajai Malhotra, India's ambassador to Russia, was held in June 2012.

Donors to the temple construction fund include Indian as well as Russian Krishna devotees, Pleshakov noted to Forum 18. "They were sure they were going to have the possibility of a temple," he remarked, "but they have been cheated."

While demanding a positive resolution to the situation, the Krishna devotees are not optimistic. "We understand very well that we aren't a 'traditional religion', so they won't make any exceptions for us," Frolov, the lawyer, remarked to Forum 18.

Russia's treatment of certain groups within Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism as the nation's privileged "traditional religions" – to the exclusion of others – is now routine (see Forum 18's general Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722).

In Moscow, Krishna devotees are generally tolerated: on 19 August, for example, Forum 18 observed one handing out the movement's literature unobstructed at the city's busy Pushkin metro station.

In 2012, however, a Public Prosecutor in the Siberian city of Tomsk narrowly failed to ban as "extremist" the Russian translation of "The Bhagavad-gita As It Is", a key text for Krishna devotees (see F18News 21 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1682).

Scattered

One year after its Moscow church building was bulldozed in similar circumstances, Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church has to meet in three separate groups in different parts of the city, Pastor Vasily Romanyuk of the Church told Forum 18 on 6 September: "Our situation hasn't improved in any way." Two groups worship at rented premises while a third group continues to hold prayer meetings at the Church's former site, now cleared of debris from the church building, added Romanyuk. "But it's already getting cold."

In 1992 Moscow City Government gave the green light for Holy Trinity Church to receive land and building rights in compensation for the loss of its late Soviet-era premises to city planning. In the years since, however, the authorities have refused to support the Pentecostals' building plans, culminating in the September 2012 destruction of the Church's "temporary" structure as unlawful (see F18News 6 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1738).

Orthodox construction a "holy deed"

Meanwhile, Moscow City Government enthusiastically supports all forms of construction by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). In the run-up to the city's 8 September mayoral elections, incumbent Sergei Sobyenin and Patriarch Kirill visited the central Church of Sophia, Wisdom of God, where the patriarch thanked the City Government for supporting restoration of its bell tower.

First Deputy Mayor of Moscow until late 2011, Vladimir Resin is a top adviser on construction to both Sobyenin and Kirill. In February 2012 he called on Muscovites to donate whatever they could to a project to build 200 new Orthodox churches in the Russian capital (see F18News 26 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1747).

Published on the Church's website for the project on 8 April 2013, a letter from City Government representative responsible for links with religious communities Yuri Artyukh praises the church-building efforts of Bishop Tikhon (Zaitsev) of Podolsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Finance Department.

Moscow City Government, Artyukh assures the bishop, "will always be alongside those performing a good and holy deed." (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

The Economist's review of Geraldine Fagan's book "Believing in Russia - Religious Policy after Communism" (Routledge, 2013) is available here <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21571111-new-look-religion-post-1991-russia-question-faith>. The book's comprehensive overview of Russian religious policy argues that continuing failure to resolve the question of whether Russia is to be an Orthodox country with religious minorities or a multi-confessional state is destabilising the nation.

An analysis of the way that the Russian authorities have used the Pussy Riot case to intensify restrictions on freedom of religion or belief is at F18News 15 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1754.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

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 Russia is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY