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KAZAKHSTAN: New threat to de-register partially demolished Hare Krishna community

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In a new threat from Kazakhstan to the Hare Krishna commune it has partially demolished, moves appear to be underway to de-register the community Forum 18 News Service has learnt. During an "unofficial" visit to the commune by four regional religious affairs officials following orders from the capital Astana, highly intrusive questions were asked in an attempt to persuade the community to seek re-registration – even though there is no legal basis for this official demand. The leader of the visit was unable to explain to Forum 18 why he asked questions that are irrelevant to merely gaining legal status, and refused to explain who had organised the visit and for what purpose. Kazakhstan has made no reply to the OSCE's Advisory Council on religious freedom's 27 November statement that it is "deeply concerned" by the state's actions and has not responded to the Council's offer of help. The commune's demolition has caused worldwide protests, even sparking a video montage of footage of the demolition and apparent remarks of the fictional character Borat.

As well as physically demolishing Hare Krishna-owned homes at their commune near the country's largest city Almaty, the authorities also appear to be trying to legally de-register the religious community based at the site, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. On 1 December, four officials from the Religious Affairs Section of the Justice Department of Almaty Region visited the farm in what they described as an "unofficial" capacity. They stated that they were following orders from the capital Astana to the regional Justice Department, Maxim Varfolomeyev of the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 on 7 December.

The officials were led by Serik Niyazbekov, a senior religious affairs official of the regional Justice Department. They claimed that the name of the community's chairman, Viktor Golous, is "not in our database" and therefore the community must apply to be re-registered by the state. Under Kazakh law, the only legal reasons for such a demand are changes in either a religious community's legal address or statutes.

A list of 23 questions was then produced by the officials, who demanded answers to questions such as:

- How many members does the community have and is this number increasing or decreasing?
- What is their approximate age?
- What nationalities are they?
- What social class do they belong to?
- Are there any foreign missionaries in the community?
- Where does the community acquire literature?
- Does the community own printing facilities in Kazakhstan and in Karasai region?
- How is the community financed?
- Do any funds come from abroad and if so from where?

Information demanded for state registration in Kazakhstan is often highly intrusive, exceeding any reasonable requirement for information necessary to obtain legal status.

Baptists have complained to Forum 18 of questions put to them about ethnicity ("Kazakhs, Russians, Germans, Koreans, Tatars, and Others"), family status, religious education of congregational leaders, their age and type of work and "the most acute problems worrying parishioners", as well as details of members' political affiliation. "Facts demanding attention on the part of state bodies,"

are also required by the state. "Such registration is a web it's almost impossible to break free of," Baptists have pointed out to Forum 18 (see F18News 9 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=797).

The Hare Krishna community answered the officials' questions during the 1 December visit, and the officials then arranged an appointment to meet Golous, the community's chairman, in an Almaty restaurant on 3 December. The Almaty region officials did not keep the appointment, although Golous did.

Niyazbekov of the regional Justice Department confirmed to Forum 18 that he was among the officials who visited the Hare Krishna commune on 1 December, adding that this was the first time he had visited the site. Despite Forum 18's repeated attempts to find out why officials had asked more than twenty questions apparently irrelevant to the legal situation of the community's legal registration, Niyazbekov was unable to explain the reasons for the questions.

"We asked about the full name of the leader, the legal address of the organisation, things like that," he told Forum 18 from Taldy-Kurgan on 8 December. He would not tell Forum 18 who had organised the visit and for what purpose. Asked repeatedly whether the Justice Department had any complaints about the way the Hare Krishna religious community had functioned, he eventually responded: "They've been registered since 2002 and so have functioned legally since then. Any problems they have are not connected with the Justice Department." Asked whether his department was preparing to strip the community of its legal status Niyazbekov responded: "I can't answer such questions."

Also on 1 December, Almaty city Justice Department rang the community to arrange to "just meet you and get to know you better".

On 5 December, Golous was telephoned by an Almaty regional official – who refused to give his name - who then started asking the same 23 questions and also when he would come in person to re-register the community's charter. Golous replied that there is no need to re-register the charter, as there is no legal basis for the request. "The official became very angry and repeated that we should come and reregister our charter," Hare Krishna sources told Forum 18. Golous responded that the visit of the officials was, according to them, "unofficial", as was the telephone conversation. He informed them that he was not obliged to respond, but, would properly respond to any request if they came through the proper channels.

"The Society for Krishna Consciousness has been registered in Almaty region since 2002 and we have never had enquiries regarding our registration until the demolition," Govinda Swami told Forum 18 on 7 December. "Now the Justice Department has begun approaching us with unofficial enquiries in their attempts to liquidate our Society. There is no article in the Kazakh Constitution obliging religious organisations to answer these questions."

On 21 November, Kazakhstan authorities began bulldozing Hare Krishna-owned homes at the Sri Vrindavan Dham commune (named after the "beautiful forest of Vrindavan" in India where Krishna spent his youth) in Karasai District, the only Hare Krishna commune in the region. Thirteen homes out of 66 have been bulldozed so far, with five more threatened with demolition. However, the authorities seem determined to complete the demolition and confiscation despite an international outcry (see F18News 24 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=876).

Judge Turdakyn Tutkushbayev of Karasai District Court – who is handling the latest five cases against Hare Krishna devotees – vigorously rejects any suggestion that the legal moves against devotees have any religious background. "We have no cases against Krishnaites," he told Forum 18 from Keskelen, the administrative centre of Karasai District, on 7 December. "We only have cases against citizen Golous." Galina Golous, a Hare Krishna devotee, is one of the five whose homes are threatened with legal confiscation (see F18News 1 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=881).

Repeatedly asked why, if the religious affiliation of the devotees is not relevant to the cases, only Hare Krishna-owned homes have been targeted for destruction and confiscation, Judge Tutkushbayev refused to answer and kept repeating: "No cases are dealt with on the basis of faith. We have not considered any Hare Krishna cases and are not now considering any Hare Krishna cases." He then declined to answer any more questions and put the phone down.

Kazakh officials in and outside the country routinely and unconvincingly deny that attacks on the commune have anything to do with religious freedom. In another example of these denials, a religious affairs official, Ryskul Zhunisbayeva, screamed at one of the devotees Galina Golous "this has nothing to do with religion," when Golous asked why a religious affairs official was involved in the case. This Kazakh claim has been contradicted by, among others, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Advisory Panel on religious freedom. Only Hare Krishna properties and devotees in the area have been targeted, and the OSCE Advisory Panel is "deeply concerned" by Kazakhstan's actions (see F18News 1 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=881).

Zhunisbayeva, who supervises religious affairs in the Karasai district Internal Affairs Department, refused to discuss why only Hare Krishna homes in the village are being seized. "They are not Krishnaites but citizens of Kazakhstan," she insisted to Forum 18 from Keskelen on 8 December. "They violated the land code and illegally seized the land." She then put the phone down.

Rati Manjari of the Hare Krishna community met Erlan Abdakasov of the national state Religious Affairs Committee, which is part

of the Justice Ministry, on 4 December, she told Forum 18 that day. When she asked why Zhunisbayeva, a religious affairs official, was representing Karasai District in the five court cases, Abdakasov claimed not to know about the cases and promised he would "investigate" them. He also claimed – without offering any explanation – that he did not know about the partial demolition of the commune.

Rati Manjari then asked what measures would be taken to restore the demolished properties for the homeless people, to which Abdakasov claimed, despite allegedly not knowing about the demolitions, that the demolition took place in line with court orders. Abdakasov also stated that the General Prosecutor's Office had told him that the court decisions against the Hare Krishna community and devotees were fair.

Abdakasov was unable to explain why - if the court decisions are fair – only Hare Krishna devotees and property have been targeted. When Rati Manjari pointed out that this is a clearly observable evidence of "religious discrimination," Abdakasov "exploded". He repeated that this was simply the execution of court decisions.

In a further worrying development, lawyers who have been defending the Hare Krishna community for the past two years were last month intimidated into stopping work for the community (see F18News 1 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=881).

Despite their eagerness to gain the chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Kazakh authorities have not responded to the 27 November offer by the OSCE Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief "to meet with the Kazakh authorities in order to discuss the situation and to extend its good offices to assist in the resolution of that dispute" (see F18News 1 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=881).

Niyazbekov of the regional Justice Department, who visited the commune on instructions from the capital Astana on 1 December, told Forum 18 on 8 December that he "honestly" knew nothing about the OSCE Advisory Council's offer of help in resolving the dispute.

Gauhar Halil of the Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation Department of the Foreign Ministry admitted that her ministry has not yet responded to the OSCE Advisory Council offer. "We have sent on the offer to the Justice Ministry and we're still waiting for a response from them," she told Forum 18 from Astana on 8 December. "This issue is within their competence not ours, so we pass on all such communications to them." She said in the past half year she has passed on about twenty or thirty communications about the fate of the commune to the Justice Ministry from organisations and institutions around the world. "All such signals are taken seriously."

However, Halil insisted that the authorities are strictly abiding by the law. "Maybe you have a distorted picture," she told Forum 18. "We don't look at the Krishnaites as Krishnaites but as lawbreakers. We are indifferent to what religion people follow – we just follow the law."

Asked whether – given the store set by the Kazakh government on its contacts with the OSCE – the government will invite members of the Advisory Council to help resolve the conflict she said she would ask the Justice Ministry again.

The OSCE has confirmed to Forum 18 that the Kazakh authorities have not replied to the OSCE. "The Advisory Council's offer was communicated through the 27 November press release. However, the Kazakh authorities have not yet responded to the OSCE, so we will be following this up with them," Urdur Gunnarsdottir, spokesperson for the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, told Forum 18 from Warsaw on 8 December. "The OSCE has been discussing the case of the Hare Krishna commune with the Kazakh authorities bilaterally since October. They are fully aware of our position."

Govinda Swami told Forum 18 that so far no other registered groups of Krishna devotees elsewhere in Kazakhstan have experienced problems. He believes this is because there are so few members where the groups are registered and, primarily, because they do not own property. "But due to the ongoing harassment in Karasai District culminating in the destruction of our community, Krishna devotees in other regions are feeling insecure as to what the government may do with them," he told Forum 18.

The authorities have long wanted to bulldoze the Hare Krishna commune (see F18News 26 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=769) and have worked with local television stations to encourage intolerance against religious minorities, such as Baptists and Hare Krishna devotees (see F18News 2 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793).

Sources, who preferred to be unnamed, have told Forum 18 of "persistent rumours" that President Nazarbayev's brother, Bulat Nazarbayev, wants to take over the land currently occupied by the commune (see F18News 17 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=872).

President Nazarbayev's government often boasts of its claimed religious tolerance, but religious minorities who experience the state's policies are sceptical of these boasts (see F18News 8 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=839).

Baptists, for example, have been given large fines for unregistered religious activity (see F18News 1 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=881). Both Muslim and Christian foreign missionaries have also been fined and deported for unregistered religious activity (see F18News 14 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=868).

The demolition of the commune and Kazakh claims of state religious tolerance has caused worldwide protests. It has even sparked a video montage of footage of the demolition and apparent remarks of the fictional character Borat, entitled "Borat Kazakhstan - Is it just a funny movie?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SJx2i-R7rU>.

The Kazakh authorities stepped up legal restrictions on religious freedom with the 2005 passage of "extremism" and "national security" amendments, which (among other things) ban unregistered religious activity, greatly curtail missionary activity, enhance state control over religious education, and permit suspension of registration of a religious organisation, with a ban on speaking to the media by members of the organisation (see the F18News Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701).

Some fear that more legal restrictions being planned by the KNB secret police will ban sharing beliefs and all missionary activity (see F18News 24 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=859). (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

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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