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KAZAKHSTAN: More Hare Krishna home demolitions planned?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

After the fining and forcing out from Kazakhstan of a Baptist for taking part in an "illegal" bible study, the Hare Krishna community is preparing to face another court hearing – due on 25 December – Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Asked whether he expects the next five Hare Krishna homes to be bulldozed after 25 December, a senior state religious affairs official told Forum 18 that "we don't know what the court will decide, but I don't expect so." Previous state assurances given to the Hare Krishna community have been broken. Maksim Varfolomeyev of the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 that the court hearing is "unlikely to be over all in one day, but it's just a matter of time. Our previous experience shows that the decision will not be in our favour," he commented. A state-appointed Commission today (22 December) presented what Krishna devotees describe as a "totally false" version of events, for use as a press release. Human rights activists, who observed the Commission's work, were devastating in their criticism of the way it operated.

The embattled Hare Krishna commune near Almaty, in southern Kazakhstan, is preparing for its next court case, due to be held on 25 December, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. After this court case, five more Hare Krishna-owned homes could be seized and bulldozed. Meanwhile, the conclusion of a government-appointed Commission has shunted responsibility for resolving the dispute back to the local authorities, who remain determined to close down the commune and seize the property.

Asked whether he expects bulldozers to destroy the next five Hare Krishna homes in the wake of the 25 December court case, Serik Niyazbekov, a senior religious affairs official of the Almaty regional Justice Department, responded: "We don't know what the court will decide, but I don't expect so, that's my view," he told Forum 18 from Taldy-Kurgan on 22 December. Previous official assurances of no action, given to the Hare Krishna community, have been broken (see F18News 21 November 2006 < http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=873).

The 25 December hearing will probably be a preliminary hearing, Maksim Varfolomeyev of the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 from Almaty on 22 December. "It's unlikely to be over all in one day, but it's just a matter of time," he said. "Our previous experience shows that the decision will not be in our favour."

Kazakhstan's religious minorities continue to have their religious freedom violated by the government. In another recent example known to Forum 18, a foreign Baptist was fined the equivalent of three months average salary and forced to leave the country, after taking part in an "illegal" bible discussion – despite, as Kazakh law professor Roman Podoprigora noted, no law having been broken by the Baptist or his church (see F18News 12 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=886).

The Sri Vrindavan Dham commune (named after the "beautiful forest of Vrindavan" in India where Krishna spent his youth) in Karasai District is the only Hare Krishna commune in the region. Thirteen homes out of 66 were bulldozed in November, which provoked protests around the world. Lawyers working to defend the commune were intimidated into dropping the case (see F18News 1 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=881).

Niyazbekov of the regional Justice Department said that, under the terms of the earlier court ruling that saw the thirteen Hare Krishna-owned homes bulldozed and confiscated, the property is to be handed back to the Ptitsevod collective from which the devotees bought them. "Something was not right with the way the people bought these houses," Niyazbekov insisted. "But I don't know all the details." He was unable to explain why only Hare Krishna-owned homes have been affected.

A further threat to the partially-demolished commune is state attempts to try to de-register the Hare Krishna community (see F18News 8 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=885).

Gauhar Halil at the Kazakh Foreign Ministry in Astana told Forum 18 on 13 December that the offer to help resolve the situation from the Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) is with the Religion Committee at the Justice Ministry and that "unfortunately" it has not yet responded (see F18News 8 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=885).

Halil added that the representatives of the OSCE office in Almaty were due to meet the Hakim (administration head) of Karasai

district, Bolat-bi Kutpanov, on 15 December. However, Hare Krishna sources told Forum 18 on 22 December that this meeting has still not taken place as Kutpanov will not schedule the meeting.

Hare Krishna devotees have suspected for some time that a state-appointed Commission on the issue was designed to divert criticism, not to resolve the problem of the state's attacks on the commune's religious freedom (see F18News 17 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=872).

Today (22 December) the Commission held a meeting for what Mukhashov described as "discussion of the results of the Commission's work". In addition to state representatives, those present were Hare Krishna representatives, a member of the OSCE office in Almaty, and Ninel Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee.

Hare Krishna sources told Forum 18 that the meeting was presented with the Commission's previously circulated Conclusions. In addition, the meeting was also given what the Hare Krishna community describes as a "totally false" version of events, which the authorities announced that they would use as a press release.

Gaukhar Beyeseyeva, an official of the Cultural and Humanitarian Co-operation with International Organisations Department of the Kazakh Foreign Ministry, addressed the meeting. She read a letter from the Foreign Ministry to the Justice Ministry which claimed that the Society for Krishna Consciousness had tried to prevent Kazakhstan from becoming OSCE Chairman-in-Office in 2009 and conducted a "campaign" involving "political, media and social organisations" against Kazakhstan. The opinions of the Foreign Ministry are irrelevant to the proclaimed aim of the Commission - to resolve the state's dispute with the Hare Krishna community over land ownership - and have no reasonable legal bearing on the matter (see F18News 17 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=872).

Kazakhstan's attacks on the Hare Krishna community have been strongly criticised by the OSCE Advisory Panel on religious freedom (see F18News 1 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=881). Other breaches of the country's international human rights obligations have been strongly criticised by a variety of international organisations (see eg. F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806).

The Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 that the Foreign Ministry presented the Commission's conclusions to diplomats from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. "One interesting point," the Hare Krishna community noted, "is that when the document was presented to representatives of different government it was an undated and unsigned document. And the Kazakh government alleges that the document was prepared prior to the demolition. This contradicts the statements of the Commission who told us immediately prior to the demolition that the work was still in progress."

None of the Commission's Conclusions addressed the key question of why the local authorities have moved only against Hare Krishna-owned homes, while other neighbouring homes which were apparently privatised in exactly the same way have not been touched. "From one angle it looks as if an earthquake has hit the village. From another, it is obvious that whatever the disaster, it picked its victims carefully," Natalia Antelova of the BBC, who visited the site on 11 December, reported. "In pristine snow by a shimmering lake, the ruins of 13 houses lie scattered amid the untouched cottages of their neighbours."

Two human rights activists who were formal observers in the Commission's work were devastating in their criticism of the way it operated. Yevgeny Zhovtis of the Kazakhstan International Bureau of Human Rights and the Rule of Law and Ninel Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee complained on 14 December that "the authorities have shown no real desire to look into the essence of the conflict and find a mutually beneficial, intelligent and just solution" for the Krishna community. "Furthermore," they continued, "the authorities constantly tried to avoid discussing the legal aspects of the issue, although the justice of the court decisions against the Krishna devotees is very doubtful" (see eg. F18News 24 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=876).

Zhovtis and Fokina noted that their impression was that the authorities are trying "to defend all their decisions, and that the main goal of the Commission was not to find the truth." The main goal of the Commission, from the observations of meetings by these two respected human rights activists, was "to prove by any means, even by "organising" public opinion, that the Society for Krishna Consciousness is not right and that there is no direct or indirect religious discrimination."

Forum 18 has seen a copy of the Commission's Conclusions – undated but signed by Amanbek Mukhashov, the head of the Religious Affairs Committee at the Justice Ministry in the capital Astana. The Conclusions call on the head of the local administration to observe the law, not to allow mistakes in privatising land and to verify the way previous sites were privatised. They call on the Hare Krishna community to ask the local authorities for land to build a temple, to conduct religious ceremonies in accordance with the law.

They also call for the Hare Krishna to maintain what the document calls an "objective presentation of the existing problems" when talking to local authorities, the media and international organisations - without stating what lies behind the accusation it implies. No call is made for the Kazakh authorities to stop claiming that the demolition and attack on the Hare Krishna community's religious freedom is not a religious freedom violation (see eg. F18News 1 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=881).

The community – but not the authorities – are also told by the Commission to resolve the dispute with the cooperative that had owned the land "in accordance with the law". It urges the Justice Department and the Religious Affairs Committee of Almaty Region to exercise "constant control" over the way local authorities, religious communities and individuals observe the Religion Law.

Legal restrictions on religious freedom have been increased by the authorities, through "extremism" and "national security" legal amendments (see the F18News Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701).
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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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