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KAZAKHSTAN: Farm confiscated, dachas to be bulldozed at Krishna commune

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

On 25 April, in the wake of a regional court ruling last year, court executors – backed by the police – arrived to bulldoze five Hare Krishna-owned dachas at their commune on the outskirts of Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty. In the end the authorities postponed the demolition because of the presence of many local journalists, but have vowed to return when the "fuss" has died down. Rati Manjari (Yekaterina Levitskaya) of the Hare Krishna community complained to Forum 18 News Service that officials gave less than the required five days notice of the proposed demolition. But a court executor defended the planned demolitions to Forum 18, claiming that it is all "perfectly legal". The Hare Krishna community believes the authorities have been trying to destroy the commune since the community bought a farm in 1999 and then bought nearby dachas. Last month a court ordered the farm to be confiscated with no compensation and a district court has ruled that five more Hare Krishna-owned dachas are to be confiscated. Only Hare Krishna-owned dachas have been targeted for confiscation and destruction.

A Kazakh official has defended the planned bulldozing on 25 April of five dachas which make up part of the Hare Krishna commune on the outskirts of the commercial capital Almaty, the only such commune in any former Soviet republic. "It was last year that the regional court took the decision to demolish five dachas which were not the private property of the Krishnaites," the senior executor of the Karasai district court administration, Askat Mirzolaev, told Forum 18 News Service on 25 April. "The Krishnaites were warned several times to move out of the dachas, so today's demolition is perfectly legal." Eventually, due to the presence of many local journalists, that authorities postponed - but have not cancelled - the demolition.

The Hare Krishna community complain not only about the planned demolition, but that the court executors gave them only a few hours notice, not the five days required by law. Rati Manjari (Yekaterina Levitskaya) of the Kazakhstan Society for Krishna Consciousness told Forum 18 on 25 April that community members are now worried that five more devotees may soon see their dachas confiscated and possibly destroyed. "It looks as if the district authorities are consistently confiscating dachas from members of the Krishna community."

The 47.7 hectare [118 acre] farm is the only Hare Krishna commune in the former Soviet Union, and has long been a focus of Kazakh state intolerance of religious freedom and attempts to close the devotees' commune down (see eg. F18News 14 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=671 and 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=764)

The court in Keskelen district has also ruled that other Hare Krishna devotees are to have their dachas confiscated. The devotees have appealed against the decision to the regional court, but hold out little hope. "Bearing in mind that the regional court backed the decision of the district court about the previous five dachas, there is a real danger that soon five more of our members are going to lose their dachas too," Levitskaya warned.

In the wake of a March Almaty regional court decision (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=764), court executors in Karasai district, a suburb of Almaty, arrived to start demolishing the five Hare Krishna-owned dachas on 25 April. Members of the community had barred access to the dachas, so the court executors had to call in the assistance of the police. "It was only on 24 April that we received written notification that the dachas were to be demolished, but the law says they have to give us written notification five days in advance," Levitskaya told Forum 18.

Although the authorities backed off from demolishing the five dachas out of apparent concern about wide media coverage, the Hare Krishna community fears they could resume demolition at any moment. One devotee, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 that a National Security Committee (KNB) secret police officer present during the operation told devotees: "You won't be able to invite so many journalists every day, so we'll wait till the fuss dies down and will quietly pull down your dachas then."

Levitskaya complained to Forum 18 of the authorities' arbitrary decision to target the devotees. She pointed out that the five dachas

were confiscated allegedly because the devotees were not the private owners of the land while only about a dozen out of the 120 members of this horticultural collective own their own land. None of the non-Hare Krishna residents has been affected. "It's specifically members of the Krishna community who are having their dachas confiscated." She said that the devotees have tried to privatise their dachas, but that the district authorities "simply won't allow them to".

Hare Krishna devotees formed the commune after buying a 47.7-hectare [118 acre] piece of land with a farm in 1999 and started buying up dachas in the Ptitsevod horticultural collective near the farm. Trouble with the authorities started more or less as soon as the commune was set up.

As well as challenging devotees' ownership of their dachas, officials have also challenged the community's ownership of the farm, claiming that its previous owners had unlawfully changed the land's registered use. On 29 March Almaty regional court decided to confiscate the farm without compensation, a decision the Hare Krishna community says was taken long after the expiry period for challenges to lawful ownership can be taken.

Levitskaya insists that the state is "trying to reduce the whole action to a mundane economic dispute" and notes that all the court documents stressed the religious affiliation of the owners. She believes the local authorities are annoyed that there is a Hare Krishna commune in Kazakhstan and also that material gain may be motivating officials (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=764). (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 printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY