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KAZAKHSTAN: "The situation could turn out badly for the Krishna followers"

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Hare Krishna devotees are increasingly sceptical that a state Commission, with the proclaimed aim of resolving a long-running dispute caused by the state's attempts to take over a Hare Krishna commune, will solve the issue, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Ludmila Danilenko, of the state Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 that "the decision that the Commission has reached will be made public shortly." Some suggest that the Commission's real aim was to deflect criticism at the contrast between the state's attacks on religious freedom and its often repeated boasts that it supports religious tolerance. Sources, which preferred to be unnamed, have told Forum 18 of "persistent rumours" that Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's brother, Bulat Nazarbayev, wants to acquire the Krishna farm. Amanbek Mukhashev of the Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that if the commune continues, "the situation could turn out badly for the Krishna followers."

Members of the Hare Krishna community are becoming increasingly sceptical that a state Commission will help them save their property from confiscation. The Commission was established in early September, with the proclaimed aim of resolving a long-standing dispute caused by state attempts to take over the commune, near the south-eastern city of Almaty. "It is more than two months since the state Religious Affairs Committee set up the special commission to settle the conflict between the Krishna devotees and the legal authorities," Hare Krishna spokesperson Maxim Varfolomeyev told Forum 18 News Service from Almaty on 15 November. "We have not received a written decision from the Commission. We are very worried at the Commission dragging out the decision." Officials have been unable to tell Forum 18 when the Commission's conclusions will be published.

At the time of the Commission's first meeting, on 8 September, some Kazakh sources suggested that its real aim was to be merely be a "show" to fend off any possible criticism at the government's "Second Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions." This was designed to bolster the government's often repeated boasts that it supports religious tolerance. 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).

The 47.7 hectare (118 acre) farm is the only Hare Krishna commune in the former Soviet Union, and local officials have long tried to close it down (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=764). In April 2006, the authorities made an attempt to bulldoze the commune, but backed off because of the presence of many journalists. However, the authorities vowed to return when the "fuss" had died down (see F18News 26 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=769). Some local television stations work with the authorities 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).

Forum 18 was unable to reach the chairman of the Commission to resolve the conflict with the Krishna devotees Amanbek Mukhashev, who is the deputy chairman of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, as he was on holiday on 15 November. "The Commission to resolve the conflict with the Krishna devotees has done a great deal of work. The decision that the Commission has reached will be made public shortly," Ludmila Danilenko, deputy chair of the Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 from the capital Astana on 15 November. However, Danilenko was unable to name a specific date when the conclusions of the Commission would be published.

Hare Krishna spokesperson Varfolomeyev is concerned at the way the Commission went about its work. "The Commission members visited us at the commune and looked into the conflict on the spot. It is significant that when they spoke to us the Commission members said that it was a purely economic dispute and that religion was not the underlying cause."

Varfolomeyev insists that the conflict does have a clear religious undercurrent. "The people who have dachas who are not Krishna devotees have also not managed to privatise their dachas but nobody is trying to confiscate the dachas from them," he told Forum 18. "It is also significant that when they come to the district authorities to privatise their dachas the first question they are asked is whether they are members of the Krishna commune."

Convincing evidence that the authorities are trying to repress the Krishna devotees' commune, according to Varfolomeyev, is that on

the day the Commission was there (1 October) the authorities brought about 20 people by bus from surrounding villages. These people were claimed by the authorities to be dissatisfied with the existence of the Krishna commune. "We had never seen these people before around our farm," he told Forum 18. "According to our information these 'demonstrators' were brought by buses hired by the administration of Keskelen district. The authorities also invited four television channels in order to give the 'protest meeting' credibility."

The chairman of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law, Yevgeni Zhovtis, has a similar view of events. He confirmed to Forum 18 that the Keskelen district authorities brought so-called "demonstrators" by bus to hold a protest meeting. "It is obvious that the conflict has a religious origin," he told Forum 18 from Almaty on 15 November. "When the Krishna devotees appeared in Keskelen district the district authorities were very concerned. I do not deny that the conflict also has a purely economic subtext, but it seems to me that if the land did not belong to the Krishna devotees the problem would probably never have arisen."

Sources that prefer to remain anonymous suggested to Forum 18 that the Krishna devotees' problems could be explained by the fact that Bulat Nazarbayev, the president's brother, wants to buy their land. They point out that the village of Chemulgan, where President Nursultan Nazarbayev was born, is in Keskelen district. "Persistent rumours are going round the district that the president's brother Bulat Nazarbayev wants to get hold of the Krishna farm," one source told Forum 18. "However, it is practically impossible to prove it. Even if Bulat Nazarbayev were to privatise the Krishna farm he would do it through other people."

Mukhashev of the Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 on 23 October that the Commission had concluded the conflict surrounding the Hare Krishna farming commune was "a purely economic dispute and that religion was not the underlying cause." However, Mukhashev contradicted himself by adding that "if the Krishna followers carry out agricultural activity as formulated in the land purchase agreement with the local authorities, they will not have any problems. If they go on putting the land to a use that was not intended [by turning the farm into a commune], then the situation could turn out badly for the Krishna followers."

It is the Kazakh authorities' usual practice to attack some religious believers and communities just because of their religious beliefs. In February 2005, Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, signed "extremism" legal amendments, which restricted religious freedom. In July 2005, President Nazarbayev signed "national security" legal amendments, which placed further substantial limitations on religious freedom. Under the "national security" amendments, unregistered religious organisations are banned in Kazakhstan and missionaries have to register with the local authorities (see the F18News Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701).

Baptists and other Protestant Christians are so far bearing the main brunt of fines for unregistered religious activity (see eg. F18News 2 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=848).

Similarly, members of the Tabligh Jama'at international Islamic missionary organisation face increased fines across Kazakhstan for trying to give lectures in mosques without state registration (see F18News 14 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=868).

This week, South Korean Pastor Kim U Sob, who had been resident in the country and leading a Presbyterian church for 8 years, was expelled on 14 November for "missionary activity without registration." Ironically, the expulsion took place shortly after Pastor Kim was an invited official speaker at a state "Day of Spiritual Unity and Conciliation" ceremony, marking the official claim that "religious people and communities" have "full rights" (see F18News 15 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=871).

Some fear that additions being planned by the KNB secret police to the Religion Law will go further and will ban sharing beliefs, as well as 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 eg. 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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