

15 June 2007

KAZAKHSTAN: More homes at Hare Krishna commune destroyed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Workers and police arrived this morning (15 June) at the village near Almaty where the embattled Hare Krishna commune is based to demolish twelve more Hare Krishna-owned homes. "The houses were literally crushed into dust. By ten o'clock it was all over," Hare Krishna spokesperson Maksim Varfolomeyev – who witnessed the latest demolitions - told Forum 18 News Service. The temple, which the devotees have been ordered to destroy by today, has not been touched but the devotees fear it could be the next target. Human rights activist Yevgeny Zhovtis is outraged at the continuing destruction. "The authorities are showing that they will do what they want, despite the international outrage at the earlier demolitions of Hare Krishna-owned homes." He believes the local administration chief "doesn't care about the political damage to Kazakhstan's reputation – or to its desire to chair the OSCE." Asked to explain the latest demolitions, one local official told Forum 18: "Here in Kazakhstan the Hare Krishnas are considered to be non-traditional."

Human rights activist Yevgeny Zhovtis has expressed his outrage at the destruction this morning (15 June) of a further twelve Hare Krishna-owned homes in the devotees' embattled commune near Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty. "What the authorities are doing is terrible," he told Forum 18 News Service from Almaty on 15 June. "This is wrong from the point of view of justice – and of compromise. The authorities are showing that they will do what they want, despite the international outrage at the earlier demolitions of Hare Krishna-owned homes."

Hare Krishna spokesperson Maksim Varfolomeyev – who witnessed the latest demolitions - told Forum 18 that the local administration organised a group of workers the previous evening to prepare for the demolitions to begin at 5 am today. He said mechanical diggers arrived, as well as two buses, one full of workers and one full of police officers. An ambulance and a fire engine were also brought in. Police tried to bar access by outsiders to the village.

"The action started just before seven o'clock on several homes simultaneously," Varfolomeyev told Forum 18. "Workers threw personal belongings outside and then started attacking the houses with sledgehammers and crowbars. Then the diggers moved in, turning from side to side, and reduced the homes to rubble. The houses were literally crushed into dust. By ten o'clock it was all over."

Over the past three years, the authorities have been determined to destroy the Sri Vrindavan Dham commune, located in the village of Seleksia in Zhetisu rural area of Karasai district and named after the "beautiful forest of Vrindavan" in India where Krishna spent his youth. The commune originally had 66 Hare Krishna-owned homes, plus the 47.7-hectare (118 acre) farm. Amid an international outcry, the authorities bulldozed 13 of the 66 homes in November 2006 and have repeatedly threatened to resume demolitions, most recently in early May (see F18News 4 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=952).

Varfolomeyev said the devotees had prayed that the demolition would not take place of their temple, located in one room of the farmhouse. An order was issued on 5 June that the devotees should take down what the authorities claim are "illegally erected constructions" – which include the farmhouse - within ten days (see F18News 6 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=970). However, no moves against the temple were made. Yet the devotees fear that this could be the next target for demolition.

Forum 18 was unable to reach any officials who could explain why further moves have been taken to destroy Hare Krishna-owned property despite official claims that the authorities are seeking a resolution to the dispute. Officials of Karasai District Hakim (administration) told Forum 18 on 15 June that neither the Hakim (administration chief), Bolat-bi Kutpanov, nor the deputy Hakim were in their offices. The telephone of Ryskul Zhunisbayeva, the Hakim's religious affairs official who has been involved in the case, went unanswered on 15 June.

Serik Niyazbekov, the senior religious affairs official for Almaty region, was unable to explain why officials want to crush the Hare Krishna commune. "They should move to another location," he told Forum 18 on 15 June. "Here in Kazakhstan the Hare Krishnas are considered to be non-traditional." Asked why this was relevant to the case Niyazbekov went silent and did not answer. "Why did they choose to move here?" he eventually asked. "They're from India."

Zhovtis, the head of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, believes that Kutpanov, the Karasai district Hakim, is backed by people close to President Nursultan Nazarbayev. "The Hakim doesn't care what senior officials in the Foreign Ministry and the Religious Affairs Committee in Astana think," Zhovtis told Forum 18. "He doesn't care about the political damage to Kazakhstan's reputation – or to its desire to chair the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)." He added that the Foreign Ministry in particular is highly concerned. "They face strong international pressure."

Zhovtis told Forum 18 that the devotees' ownership documents do contain some inaccuracies. But he believes their documents are no better or worse than many home owners' documents and the inaccuracies could predate the devotees' ownership. "I don't believe the Hare Krishnas did anything wrong and I don't believe the presence of such minor inaccuracies makes their ownership illegal. Such inaccuracies could be corrected by anyone who genuinely wanted to seek to resolve this."

Zhovtis believes that economic reasons are behind the attempts to seize the Hare Krishna-owned property, but adds that religious discrimination is another factor in why they have been targeted. He points out that of the 200 or so home owners in the village, many of whom privatised their property just as the Hare Krishna owners have done, no-one else has had their ownership questioned, let alone had their homes destroyed. "Clearly they are attacking only the Hare Krishnas."

Zhovtis told Forum 18 that no similar moves against property owners have been seen elsewhere, except in the case of squatters who put up homes illegally near Almaty. "Even then the police decision to move against the squatters was I believe wrong."

Varfolomeyev of the Hare Krishna community points out that of the homes demolished last November, piles of rubble still remain today.

Official intolerance of religious minorities is rising in Kazakhstan. Fines on Baptists who choose not to register their religious communities are increasing, while a group of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Caspian Sea port of Atyrau were heavily fined in early June for meeting for worship without registration. They have tried in vain to gain legal status for the past six years. Officials repeatedly deny that this official intolerance exists, for example claiming at an OSCE conference last week that the country is an "oasis of stability and religious accord" (see F18News 7 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=972).

Government documents have attacked Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees and Ahmadi Muslims, sentiments often echoed by officials and commentators in the state-owned media (see F18News 3 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=939).

The authorities are planning to amend the country's already restrictive Religion Law (see F18News 21 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=916). Every time the Law has been amended since its adoption in 1992 its provisions have become harsher. (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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