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RUSSIA: Blocks to acquiring places of worship

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

A Muslim community in southern Russia has been told to demolish its mosque by 1 May, or it will be demolished by the local authority, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The dispute in the city of Astrakhan revolves around the renovation of a disused silage tower and two-storey annexe for use as a mosque – which a regional court has described along with the municipal administration as "unauthorised construction" – and the construction of a new mosque on the site. Approval for the mosque construction was given in 2001, but construction only started in 2005 after sufficient funds had been collected; this too must now be removed. The Muslims claim that there was a sudden change in attitude by the local authority following a visit by President Vladimir Putin. Hare Krishna and Buddhist religious communities in Moscow have also recently complained to Forum 18 about attempts to block their acquisition of places of worship. Permission to build a Hare Krishna temple was withdrawn amid hostility from a Russian Orthodox Archbishop, and a Tibetan Buddhist group lost their city centre premises due to a municipal construction project.

Representatives of Muslim, Hare Krishna and Buddhist religious communities have recently complained to Forum 18 News Service that the state is blocking their acquisition of worship premises. A Muslim community in the southern Russian city of Astrakhan has been ordered to demolish its mosque by 1 May, while Moscow's Hare Krishna community saw permission to build a new temple suddenly withdrawn last autumn after the plans had already been agreed. A Tibetan Buddhist retreat centre near Moscow chose to sell up following local hostility and now intends to move to Ukraine.

Some Protestant churches have expressed similar concerns to Forum 18 about the difficulties of acquiring places of worship (see F18News 20 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=730).

Astrakhan's mosque

Muslims meeting at Mosque No 34 on the outskirts of Astrakhan have until 1 May to demolish their worship building themselves or face its destruction by the state authorities, after they lost a 1 March regional court appeal, the community's lawyer Veronika Karpicheva told Forum 18 on 7 March.

The appeal was against a 23 January decision, of which Forum 18 has received a copy, in which Astrakhan's Soviet District Court agreed with the municipal administration that the mosque – a disused silage tower and two-storey annexe on the road to the city's airport – qualified as "unauthorised construction" and should be removed.

The Muslims purchased the 600 square-metre (6,450 square-foot) site in 1998 and received permission to carry out the preliminary construction work of a new mosque building during the first half of 2001. However, the court noted that they did not start until almost four years later, and that the Muslim community's refurbishment and extension of the disused silage tower was not on the construction plan approved by the city's architectural department. The court also ruled that the currently-existing construction work for the new mosque - begun in 2005 after the community had collected sufficient funds - must also be removed.

Why?

Karpicheva, however, told Forum 18 that the Muslims are sceptical about the bureaucratic reasons given for the demolition order. Their situation abruptly changed, she explained, following a visit by President Vladimir Putin to Astrakhan in August 2005: "He is supposed to have made a remark to our [regional] governor and mayor – something along the lines that they hadn't chosen a very good place for a mosque."

Earlier, as their leader Asya Makhmudova told Soviet District Court, the local administration had backed the Muslims' plans, even allocating 18,000 roubles [4,250 Norwegian Kroner, 535 Euros, or 650 US Dollars] towards the purchase of the land. In a 20 February article on the Russian Islam-Info website, Veronika Karpicheva quotes a 5 December 2003 letter from then mayor Igor Bezrukavnikov asking a local energy company to install gas for the Muslim community – then already using the disused silage tower for worship. The construction of a new mosque, maintained the document, "means a cultural revival for our young generation and will allow our region, no matter what squabbles surround us, to live in peace, friendship and accord". Gas, electricity and water supplies to the mosque were all disconnected late last year.

Denied permission to hold a 20 February demonstration outside Astrakhan's municipal administration building, the Muslims have now gathered over 1,000 signatures protesting the demolition order, Karpicheva told Forum 18. She added that they intend to appeal to the Supreme Court, although it is unclear whether their case will be heard before the 1 May deadline.

On 20 March a spokesman at Astrakhan city administration's press department told Forum 18 that only Mayor Sergei Bozhenov's press secretary could respond to questions about Mosque No 34. There was no response at the number he gave, however.

Moscow's Hare Krishna devotees

On 7 October 2005 the Moscow authorities likewise suddenly withdrew permission for the construction of a new temple in the city by the Society for Krishna Consciousness. The community – which attracted 7,000 people to a festival last August – is currently "in uncertainty" in temporary accommodation on the construction site, its representative Sergei Zuyev (Radkhar Damodar) told Forum 18 on 13 March. Having spent over two million roubles on the project and approved an architectural design with considerable difficulty due to its distinctiveness from the surrounding concrete blocks on Leningrad Prospect, he said, the Hare Krishna devotees have subsequently turned to Moscow's Arbitration Court. While their appeal is heard over the next few months, the community cannot be evicted from the site, even though Moscow's land committee ordered it to leave in January.

In withdrawing their permission, according to Zuyev, the city authorities cited paperwork errors to do with the terms of land usage, "but that is the state's responsibility, not ours". Although he commented that the community is now "up against a bureaucratic brick wall," he added that a top city official remarked in a meeting a month ago that its situation was "the most burning issue of religious organisations" in Moscow, "so we haven't lost hope yet".

Zuyev also told Forum 18 that two aspects of the situation were causing particular concern. Already demolished as part of a municipal building programme, the Hare Krishna community's previous Moscow temple premises were given in 1989 as part of the confession's rehabilitation in the late Soviet period. (In the early 1980s some 50 of its members – including Zuyev himself – were incarcerated in prisons and psychiatric institutions.) "Our old building suited us and we wouldn't have left it," he remarked. "This land was supposed to be compensation."

"An idolatrous heathen temple"

In addition, the Hare Krishna devotees share their temple with Hindus from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Mauritius. Consequently, said Zuyev, the 30 November 2005 letter in which Russian Orthodox Archbishop Nikon (Vasyukov) of Ufa and Sterlitamak asked Mayor Luzhkov not to allow the construction of "an idolatrous heathen temple" to Krishna - "an evil demon personifying the forces of hell" - has caused shock and dismay in India. A 21 November 2005 report on the situation in the Indian daily newspaper "Navbharat Times" concluded "the only option remaining for the disappointed Indians in the Russian capital is to write letters of protest to the Russian authorities and to be indignant. As one leading Indian businessman in Moscow remarked to us, 'Russia receives billions of dollars from India for weaponry. So why do they treat us with such disdain in Moscow?'" Also, the leader of the Hindu Council of Britain, Ramesh Kallidai, has launched a "Defend Russian Hindus" campaign with the support of Indian and British parliamentarians and a wide range of other Hindu organisations.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 14 March, Konstantin Blazhenov of Moscow's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations said that, while there was no longer any inconsistency between the Land Code and the city's original decision to allocate land for the temple, the application would have to be made all over again. When Forum 18 asked if the Hare Krishna community would then be able to build on the site allocated, he said that a new site would have to be found as there was "a question of architecture" which the municipal architecture department was currently resolving.

Tibetan Buddhists' struggle fails

Rinchenling, a 200-strong community following the Dzogchen tradition within Tibetan Buddhism, also lost its Moscow city centre premises in 2004 due to a municipal construction project, representative Anna Artemeva told Forum 18 on 8 March. Unlike the Hare Krishna community, they were not offered compensation, she said, as there was no provision for it in their 1997 rental contract with the city authorities. "We were told that we shouldn't expect anything from them as religious organisations are separate from the state."

In January Rinchenling also closed its Kunsangar retreat centre in Moscow region. Artemeva told Forum 18 that the group's Tibetan teacher, Chogyal Namkai Norbu, had told the group to sell the retreat centre due to the negative influence of local Orthodox. "He decided it was better to sell now as relations would only get worse," she remarked. Rinchenling is now planning to set up a retreat centre in Crimea (Ukraine) she added. "People are more tolerant towards different religions there."

State finance for some

While the Russian state authorities are indeed not obliged to assist religious communities in acquiring property, they have

contributed large sums of public money to the construction of worship premises by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and so-called "traditional" Buddhists (see F18News 11 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=29, 22 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=346 and 9 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=389. (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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