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KAZAKHSTAN: Only Hare Krishna commune in CIS to be confiscated

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The long running struggle of Kazakhstan's Hare Krishna community to retain a farm they own - their only commune in the former Soviet Union - has intensified, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, as Almaty regional court has ordered the farm to be confiscated without compensation. "We will contest this decision in the Kazakhstan Supreme Court of Supervision. The situation is critical. Under the law the court bailiffs can come to us at any moment and begin to take the land from us," Rati Manjari (Yekaterina Levitskaya), of the Society for Krishna Consciousness, told Forum 18. The commune has long been the target of state attempts to close it down, which the community thinks may be motivated by state intolerance of Hare Krishna devotees and greed for material gain. Other religious minorities in Kazakhstan - such as Protestants - are also experiencing state intolerance of religious freedom.

The long running struggle of Kazakhstan's Hare Krishna community to retain a farm they own on the outskirts of the commercial capital Almaty has intensified, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. On 29 March, Almaty regional court decided to confiscate the farm without compensation. "We will contest this decision in the Kazakhstan Supreme Court of Supervision. The situation is critical. Under the law the court bailiffs can come to us at any moment and begin to take the land from us," Rati Manjari (Yekaterina Levitskaya), of the Society for Krishna Consciousness of Kazakhstan, told Forum 18 on 18 April.

The latest reason claimed by the state for confiscating the land is an accusation of forgery, allegedly committed by the former owners - not the current Hare Krishna owners - when the land was bought by the community in 1999. The state alleges that the former owners changed the registered use recorded in the sale contract from 'peasant farm' to 'subsidiary farm'. Under Kazakh law, only the district administration head (akim) has the right to change the registered use of land. The 47.7 hectare [118 acre] farm is the only Hare Krishna commune in the former Soviet Union, and has long been the target of state attempts to close it down (see eg. F18News 14 October 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=671>).

However, Kazakhstan's case against the Hare Krishna devotees breaks the country's own laws. When the current legal action was initiated in May 2005, twice the time within which legal action should be taken (3 years) had already elapsed. Despite this major flaw in the state's case, the Almaty regional court ignored this objection.

"The state is trying to reduce the whole action to a mundane economic dispute. However, it is obvious that the rights of dozens of Kazakh citizens belonging to a religious minority are being crudely violated. In all the court documents the religious adherence of the respondents is emphasised, which is a crude violation of their constitutional rights", Levitskaya of the Hare Krishnas told Forum 18.

She believes the local authorities are annoyed that a Hare Krishna commune is in Kazakhstan. "Some officials in Astana [the capital] have said to me bluntly 'What do you expect - you are the only religious minority association that owns such a large piece of land,'" Levitskaya told Forum 18. She also thinks that material gain may be motivating Kazakh officials. "It really is a very good and large piece of land. We have put a lot of effort into improving it. It would be very advantageous to acquire such a property." Forum 18 has itself documented state intolerance of the Hare Krishna devotees and their commune's religious freedom (see F18News 14 October 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=671>).

Kazakh officials are reluctant to discuss the case with Forum 18. "It is too soon to say this case is closed. The Hare Krishnas can contest the decision of the regional court. I have been following this case very closely and I talk regularly with the Hare Krishnas. But until the court proceedings are concluded I cannot make any comment," Galaskar Syrybaev, the state Religious Affairs Representative for Almaty region, told Forum 18 on 18 April.

Other religious minorities in Kazakhstan - such as Protestants - are also experiencing increasing state intolerance of religious freedom (see F18News 1 March 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=735>). (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>>

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