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KAZAKHSTAN: Will rest of Hare Krishna commune now be destroyed?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18, and Felix Corley, Forum 18

With almost a quarter of the Hare Krishna-owned homes in their Sri Vrindavan Dham commune on the outskirts of Almaty already destroyed, community members are afraid that the rest of the 66 homes – including their temple – could be next. "The community is in shock, but they are determined to defend their homes and place of worship," community member Govinda Swami told Forum 18 News Service. He says destruction of the temple would be "devastating". Neighbouring houses owned by non-Krishna devotees have not been touched and sources have told Forum 18 that President Nursultan Nazarbayev's brother has designs on the property. Local administration chief Bagdad Akhmetayev refused to say why the homes were being destroyed when the court merely ordered the devotees' eviction, telling Forum 18 "I simply came to watch the demolition and I am not prepared to make any comment. Please ask the court bailiffs directly." The bailiffs refused to talk to Forum 18. Police prevented OSCE officials from reaching the village during the 21 November destruction.

Devotees in the embattled Hare Krishna commune in a village near Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty have vowed to fight on, despite the authorities' destruction on 21 November of 13 of 66 Hare Krishna-owned homes. "The community is in shock, but they are determined to defend their homes and place of worship," community member Govinda Swami told Forum 18 News Service from the Indian capital Delhi on 24 November. "They don't want to give the signal that they've been defeated by the government." But he says the remaining home owners fear that court rulings against others could see them evicted too and that the community especially fears for the temple, housed on one floor of one of the homes.

The authorities insist the Hare Krishna devotees have no right to their homes. But two human rights activists who witnessed the destruction despite police attempts to stop them, Ninel Fokina and Andrei Grishin, pointed out that while 13 of the 66 Hare Krishna homes were destroyed on court orders, "the adjacent houses of other people who do not belong to the Society for Krishna Consciousness were left untouched even though their title deeds have the same status".

The Sri Vrindavan Dham commune (named after the "beautiful forest of Vrindavan" in India where Krishna spent his youth) is in the village of Seleksia in Zhetisu rural area of Karasai district, 40 kms (25 miles) from Almaty. It was the only such Hare Krishna commune in the region and officials have long sought to suppress it.

Govinda Swami, a US member of the community until he had to leave Kazakhstan on 20 November as his visa expired, said he believes the homes were destroyed to demoralise the community and force it to leave the village. "Then they will move in to destroy the temple, situated in one of the homes," he told Forum 18. "If the authorities destroy the temple it would be devastating as they would have effectively destroyed the community."

Maksim Varfolomeyev, spokesperson for Kazakhstan's Society for Krishna Consciousness, is outraged by the way Karasai district court bailiffs demolished the 13 Hare Krishna-owned homes. "Our co-believers' belongings were just thrown in the mud," he told Forum 18 on 23 November. "Officials simply refused to talk with us or explain what they were doing." Those evicted from their homes have had to take shelter with other commune members or move to Almaty.

The community has posted a video of the destruction and photographs of the destroyed homes on its website <http://www.palaceofthesoul.com>

At the office of the Karasai district court bailiffs, the duty officer who refused to give his name said on 23 November that all the senior staff were out of the office and there was nobody who could answer Forum 18's questions.

Also unwilling to explain to Forum 18 why the Hare Krishna homes have been destroyed is Bagdad Akhmetayev, the hakim (head) of the rural administration of Zhetisu in Karasai district where the Krishna farm is located. According to Varfolomeyev, he was the only representative of the district authorities present at the demolition. "I simply came to watch the demolition and I am not prepared to make any comment. Please ask the court bailiffs directly," Akhmetayev told Forum 18 on 23 November.

"Unfortunately Kazakh law does not prohibit evictions during the winter period and also does not oblige the court bailiffs to give those being evicted a few days notice," human rights activist Yevgeni Zhovtis, of the Kazakhstan International Bureau on Human Rights and the Rule of Law, told Forum 18 from Almaty on 23 November. "All the same, there were crude violations of the law. The court bailiffs had the right to evict the residents of the houses but not to demolish the buildings themselves. It was also a very crude violation to throw the belongings of the Krishna devotees into the mud. The court bailiffs were obliged to put the devotees' belongings into store."

Human rights activists Fokina and Grishin rushed to the village on 21 November as soon as they heard the news of the destruction. They found it blockaded by police and had to gain access by foot.

In their joint account of events, they report attempts to prevent evidence of the destruction reaching the outside world. They reported that hakim Akhmetayev noticed Grishin photographing the destruction of the houses using a digital camera and ordered the police to detain him. To avoid confiscation of the camera Grishin tried to escape, but was caught by the police, who confiscated his camera and journalist accreditation.

Grishin was then freed, but the police (who would not give their names) refused to return the camera, saying they would give it to the hakim. Fokina and Grishin report that the camera was indeed found in the hakim's car, but the flash card and the batteries were confiscated. When Grishin approached Akhmetayev to find out why his camera and his journalist accreditation had been confiscated, the hakim told him in front of witnesses, "If I see you here again, I will personally smash your eyes, even though I am the hakim."

Fokina and Grishin report that police stopped the car carrying two officials of the Almaty office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Eugenia Benigni and Lisa Zhumakhmetova, who were therefore unable to reach the village.

The demolition was carried out with some brutality, at least one home being destroyed with a mother and infant child still inside. By 4.50 pm on the day the demolition began (21 November), after OPON riot police had sealed off the area and cameras were confiscated from witnesses, three houses were destroyed. The windows of the other houses had been smashed to render the houses uninhabitable in the freezing Kazakh weather conditions. Temperatures that night were expected to drop to minus 3 degrees Centigrade (26 degrees Fahrenheit) (see F18News 21 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=873).

OPON riot police who took part in the destruction threw personal belongings of the Hare Krishna devotees into the snow, and many devotees were left without clothes. Power for lighting and heating systems had been cut off before the demolition began. Furniture and larger household belongings were loaded onto trucks. Officials said these possessions would be destroyed. Two men who tried to prevent the bailiffs from entering a house to destroy it were seized by 15 police officers who twisted their hands and took them away to the police car.

The homes were demolished even though the Hare Krishna community was promised that no action would be taken before the report of a state Commission – supposedly set up to resolve the dispute – was made public. The chair of that Commission, Amanbek Mukhashev of the state Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 that if the commune continues, "the situation could turn out badly for the Krishna followers" (see F18News 17 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=872). Mukhashev claimed to Forum 18 on the day the demolition began that "I know nothing about the demolition of the Hare Krishna homes – I'm on holiday," adding that "as soon as I return to work at the beginning of December we will officially announce the results of the Commission's investigation" (see F18News 21 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=873).

Apart from the ongoing official process, the demolition violated Kazakh laws by giving only 24 hours notice of the demolition, the demolition orders not being personally served on and signed for by their intended victims, and because officials of the public prosecutor's office were not present to oversee the enforcement of the court rulings.

Fokina and Grishin complain about the court orders delivered the day before the demolition. "The date of execution and the period for evacuating the buildings were not stated," they point out. "It should be noted that Kazakh law does not stipulate such a kind of eviction as the demolition of houses, and the eviction should be accompanied by the inventory of property removed from the evacuated building, while the storage of this property should be provided as necessary."

It is also unclear – given the illegalities surrounding the demolition - how the authorities plan to legally carry out their threat to charge the Hare Krishna devotees for the demolition of the homes and commune.

The authorities have long wanted to take over the Hare Krishna community and their commune (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=764). An attempt earlier this year to bulldoze the commune was frustrated by the presence of local journalists, but the authorities vowed to try again when the "fuss" had died down (see F18News 26 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=769). The authorities have with some local television stations encouraged intolerance against religious minorities, such as Baptists and Hare Krishna devotees. This hostile coverage has, the devotees are convinced, led to intolerant attacks on them by other Kazakh citizens (see F18News 2 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793).

Sources, who preferred to be unnamed, have told Forum 18 of "persistent rumours" that Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's brother, Bulat Nazarbayev, wants to take over the Hare Krishna devotees' farm (see F18News 17 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=872).

Kazakhstan is currently bidding to become Chairman-in-Office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), despite the country's poor human rights record (see eg. F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806). President Nazarbayev's government often boasts of its claimed religious tolerance, but 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).

Legal restrictions on religious freedom have been increased by the authorities, through "extremism" and "national security" legal amendments (see the F18News Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701). Baptists and other Protestant Christians have so far been the main victims of the legal changes, being fined for unregistered religious activity (see eg. F18News 2 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=848).

Foreign missionaries belonging to both the Presbyterian church (see F18News 15 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=871) and Tabligh Jama'at international Islamic missionary organisation have been fined and deported (see F18News 14 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=868). Some fear that changes being planned by the KNB secret police to the Religion Law will ban sharing beliefs and 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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