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KAZAKHSTAN: Hare Krishna demolitions held off – for now

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

Even though a Hare Krishna commune was told by phone today (4 May) that court executors were on their way to re-start demolitions of Hare Krishna-owned homes, none had arrived by late afternoon today, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The latest demolition threat repeated an official warning given yesterday. This morning, the electricity supply to the commune's homes was cut off – but was then restored after 30 minutes. The only official who spoke to Forum 18, in the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, refused to give his name and insisted that the dispute is economic and not religious discrimination. Asked why a range of religious minority communities in Kazakhstan face official intolerance - including raids, official bans on their activity, fines, detentions, arbitrary denial of legal status and denigration in official publications - the unnamed official responded: "This is disinformation. We have no information about such occurrences. Accusations of discrimination are challengeable in law." The unnamed official insisted to Forum 18 that "no violations of international standards" take place in Kazakhstan.

Although the Hare Krishna commune was told by phone today (4 May) that Karasai District Court executors were on their way to re-start demolitions of Hare Krishna-owned homes, none had arrived by late afternoon on 4 May, Maxim Varfolomeyev of the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 News Service from the village near Almaty. "Earlier this morning, after we were told that court executors were on their way to resume demolishing the 13 homes, the electricity supply was cut off." The electricity was later restored, but Varfolomeyev said the community does not know when the threatened demolitions will begin again.

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 - originally had 66 Hare Krishna-owned homes, plus a 47.7-hectare (118 acre) farm.

Following telephone threats on 3 May to re-start demolition of the devotees' homes (see F18News 3 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=951), representatives from the local media, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Centre in Almaty, and the US Embassy visited the community today.

The Hare Krishna community this morning rang the General Prosecutor's Office, the Presidential Administration and the state Religious Affairs Committee to protest about the demolitions. But they were given "the usual story that no senior officials could speak to us," Varfolomeyev told Forum 18. The General Prosecutors Office claimed that, legally, they could not intervene in local court proceedings, so there was nothing that they could do.

But 30 minutes after the electricity supply was cut off, the power supply to the commune was restored.

Later, the deputy chair of the state Religious Affairs Committee, Ludmila Danilenko, told the Hare Krishna community that she had spoken to the Almaty Regional Hakim (administration), and they had stated that they had no involvement in sending Karasai District Court executors to the commune. The Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 that they think that the decision to send the court executors was made within the Karasai Hakim, and that Anatoli Portnyagin, who has represented the Hakim in court cases against the commune, may have made ordered the latest demolition threats.

On 4 May, Forum 18 tried to reach Gulnara Sultonova, head of the Internal Policy Department at the Karasai Hakim, and her subordinate, Ryskul Zhunisbayeva, who heads the Department's section dealing with religious organisations. However, both telephones went unanswered.

Officials at the office in Astana of the Human Rights Ombudsperson Bolat Baikadamov told Forum 18 on 4 May that he is abroad until the end of May, currently in the United States. They refused to say where he is and the purpose of the visit. Baikadamov's subordinate, Vyacheslav Kalyuzhny, refused absolutely to comment to Forum 18 on the latest moves against the Hare Krishna commune. He also refused to comment on Baikadamov's contradictions of his own statements to the Hare Krishna community (see F18News 3 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=951).

The official who answered the phone on 4 May of Eraly Tugzhanov, head of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, refused to give his name. However, he insisted to Forum 18 that the dispute over the Hare Krishna commune is economic and is not

based on religious discrimination. Asked why only Hare Krishna devotees have had their houses confiscated, bulldozed and threatened he retorted: "Do you think other people apart from the Krishnaites have broken the law?" He insisted that the dispute will be resolved "according to the law".

Asked why a range of religious minority communities in Kazakhstan face official intolerance - including raids, official bans on their activity, fines, detentions, arbitrary denial of legal status and denigration in official publications - the unnamed official responded: "This is disinformation. We have no information about such occurrences. Accusations of discrimination are challengeable in law." The unnamed official insisted to Forum 18 that "no violations of international standards" take place in Kazakhstan.

Kazakh authorities at all levels have repeatedly refused to accept responsibility for their religious freedom violations, or for resolving them (see F18News 31 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=905), even denying that demolishing the commune is a religious freedom violation (see F18News 1 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=881).

Among other religious minorities facing hostility are Baptists, one of whose pastors was jailed for three days in March for leading an unregistered congregation (see F18News 13 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=931). A state crackdown on Baptist and Pentecostal Christians was described by police as "the fight against terrorism and religious groups without registration" (see F18News 28 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=921).

Varfolomeyev of the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 that he does not think that demolitions will now take place today. He pointed out that, under Kazakh law, five days written notice of demolitions must be given. However, as in the current situation, the authorities may not respect this.

Numerous court cases have been started by the authorities against Hare Krishna community, who have told Forum 18 that "we cannot win court cases as the judiciary is simply a puppet in the hands of influential persons." (see F18News 3 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=951).

Kazakhstan is currently planning to even more severely restrict religious freedom via a new Religion Law, and the KNB secret police are planning separate restrictions on religious freedom via the Anti-terrorism Law (see F18News 21 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=916). (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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY