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KAZAKHSTAN: State bulldozes Hare Krishna commune, bids to chair OSCE

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

As Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev is in London seeking support for his bid to chair the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), state authorities began today (21 November) bulldozing the only Hare Krishna commune in the region, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The costs of the demolition are being imposed by the authorities on the Hare Krishna devotees and OPON riot police have sealed off the commune. "At present a bulldozer is knocking down one house," Hare Krishna devotee Anastasia told Forum 18 from the site as she watched the destruction, "while a further four are being knocked down by hand." Officials carrying out the destruction have refused to speak to Forum 18. The demolition contradicts earlier Kazakh official assurances that all actions in the authorities long-running attempt to take over the commune would be frozen. Religious freedom and other human rights in Kazakhstan have been for some years under increasing threat from President Nazarbayev's government.

Today (21 November) the demolition began of 13 Hare Krishna-owned homes at the Hare Krishna commune, spokesperson Maksim Varfolomeyev told Forum 18 News Service from the commercial capital Almaty. He said the authorities had brought two buses of OPON riot police and closed off all access to the commune. "At present a bulldozer is knocking down one house," Anastasia, a Hare Krishna devotee, told Forum 18 from the site as she watched the destruction, "while a further four are being knocked down by hand." Forum 18 asked Anastasia to pass her mobile phone to the officials organising the demolition so that they could explain to Forum 18 why they were doing so, but they refused to speak to Forum 18. Officials at the scene have been confiscating cameras from witnesses.

At the time of publication of this article (4.50 pm Almaty time), three homes have been destroyed, and all the windows in the homes of the Hare Krishna devotees have been destroyed.

"I have no words to describe what I have seen," Ninel Fokina, head of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, told Forum 18 from the demolition site. "They have no right to move people out of their homes in winter."

It is currently snowing in Almaty, with the temperature being 6 degrees Centigrade (42 degrees Fahrenheit), and expected to drop to minus 3 degrees Centigrade (26 degrees Fahrenheit) tonight.

"It is indicative that the demolition of the homes began before we had been given the results of the state special Commission's investigation into the conflict over the commune," Varfolomeyev told Forum 18. "It's also significant that the Commission chairman – Amanbek Mukhashev of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee – promised us that implementation of any court decisions would be frozen until the results of the Commission's investigation were officially published." He said the Commission had appealed to the General Prosecutor's Office to that effect.

The state Commission was set up with the proclaimed aim of resolving the state's long-running dispute with the Hare Krishna community. Devotees are increasingly sceptical that the Commission was anything more than a device to deflect any criticism of state religious intolerance. The Deputy chair of the state Religious Affairs Committee, Ludmila Danilenko, told Forum 18 last week that the Commission's decision "will be made public shortly." Amanbek Mukhashev of the 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).

The order to demolish the homes was issued by the Karasai District Court, where the commune is based, and is being carried out by the Court Executors. "The bulldozers belong to the Karasai district administration," the Hare Krishna devotees report. The execution orders were given to a night watchman. "Not one person has personally received the order or has signed that it has been received," – as the law requires - they added.

Yesterday (20 November), at 6 AM in the morning, an unidentified person delivered a stack of orders from the Court Executors of the Karasai District Court. The orders stated that the owners of cottages must destroy their own homes, or they will be destroyed by the government at the expense of the owners. 24 hours later, several busses of OPON riot police, 2 ambulances, 2 empty lorries, and

Court Executors arrived to destroy the Krishna devotees' homes and personal temples.

"I know nothing about the demolition of the Hare Krishna homes – I'm on holiday," Mukhashev told Forum 18 on 21 November from the capital Astana. "As soon as I return to work at the beginning of December we will officially announce the results of the Commission's investigation." He acknowledged that the Commission had decided to freeze the implementation of all court decisions about the Hare Krishna commune until the Commission's results had been officially published. But he told Forum 18 it is difficult to say whether he believed the demolition of the homes is lawful.

"It is snowing in Kazakhstan and these folks are losing their homes," Govinda Swami, a leading member of the community who is a US citizen, told Forum 18 from Delhi on 21 November. "They entered one home where there was woman with infant and started destroying her home. We have been regularly told that the work of the commission is not finished and still they have attacked in this way." He said that it is "not a coincidence" that on 20 November his Kazakh visa expired "and on 21st they attacked". He expressed disappointment at what he regarded as the Commission and the President's bad faith.

He said that when his colleague Rati Manjari managed to get through to Mukhashev he put down the phone. He said community members had contacted other officials in the Religious Affairs Committee "who had no idea what was going on".

Govinda Swami added that Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee had spoken to Kazakhstan's human rights ombudsperson, Bolat Baikadamov, who said that he would go to the Religious Affairs Committee to enquire what is happening.

The moves against the Hare Krishna came during President Nazarbayev's visit to the United Kingdom (UK) and on the same day that he was meeting British Prime Minister Tony Blair. "The President will be seeking Mr Blair's support for Kazakhstan's bid to be the first Central Asian chairman-in-office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2009," the Kazakhstan Embassy in London declared in its announcement of the visit. A survey of the religious freedom decline in the OSCE area, including in Kazakhstan, is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

The Almaty Centre of the OSCE told Forum 18 on 21 November that its human rights officer is monitoring the destruction of the commune.

An official of the Kazakh Embassy in the UK, who did not wish to be identified as he was not authorised to speak to the media, acknowledged to Forum 18 on 21 November that President Nazarbayev had promised to Hare Krishna leaders on 11 September that he would look into the problems of the commune and resolve them (see F18News 2 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=848). "But if he promised to consider the issue it doesn't mean that he would allow people to violate the law, if they illegally built their homes." The official declined to comment on how the Kazakh government's attack on religious freedom reflected on its claims of religious tolerance, or on whether this would harm the country's attempts to gain the chairmanship of the OSCE.

President Nazarbayev's government often boasts of its claimed religious tolerance, for example at a recent "Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions." 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).

The religious freedom of the Hare Krishna community and other Kazakhs has been under increasing threat from the government of President Nazarbayev for some years. The Hare Krishna devotees' 47.7 hectare (118 acre) farm is the only Hare Krishna commune in the former Soviet Union, and officials have long tried to close it down (see F18News 19 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=764). Earlier this year, the authorities attempted to bulldoze the commune, but backed off because of the local media attention this drew. However, they vowed to return to bulldoze the commune when the "fuss" had died down (see F18News 26 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=769). Some local television stations work with the authorities to encourage intolerance against religious minorities, such as Baptists and Hare Krishna devotees. The devotees are convinced that this leads to intolerant attacks on them from 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).

Legal restrictions on religious freedom have been increasing. In February 2005, Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, signed "extremism" legal amendments, which restricted religious freedom as did July 2005 "national security" legal amendments. Under the "national security" amendments, unregistered religious organisations are banned (see the F18News Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701).

Baptists and other Protestant Christians are so far bearing the main brunt of fines for unregistered religious activity (see eg. F18News 2 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=848).

Last week, South Korean Pastor Kim U Sob, who had been resident in the country and leading a Presbyterian church for 8 years, was expelled on 14 November for "missionary activity without registration." Ironically, the expulsion took place shortly after Pastor Kim was an invited official speaker at a state "Day of Spiritual Unity and Conciliation" ceremony, marking the official claim that "religious people and communities" have "full rights" (see F18News 15 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=871).

Similarly, members of the Tabligh Jama'at international Islamic missionary organisation face fines for giving lectures in mosques without state registration (see F18News 14 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=868).

Missionary activity without official permission is punished with administrative fines, and expulsion for foreigners. The authorities have also engaged in extra-legal harassment of religious communities, such as a Hare Krishna commune near the country's commercial centre, Almaty (see F18News 8 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=839).

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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