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KAZAKHSTAN: Hare Krishna demolition re-started – then halted by "person in a black Mercedes"

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

Today (20 March), Kazakh authorities resumed the demolition of an embattled Hare Krishna commune, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Demolition re-started this morning, but was suddenly halted on the arrival of "a person in a black Mercedes Benz car," who ordered the demolition to stop. The demolition squad then departed. Official pressure on the Hare Krishna commune has been steadily increasing this year and it remains unclear who stands to benefit from the attacks on the Hare Krishna commune. Some sources have told Forum 18 of "persistent rumours" that Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's brother, Bulat Nazarbayev, wants to acquire the Krishna property. Local officials are also suspected of standing to benefit financially. Official hostility to the religious freedom of Hare Krishna devotees, and other religious minorities, is compatible with officials acting from hopes of personally benefiting from the property of the Hare Krishna commune.

Today (20 March), Kazakh authorities resumed the demolition of the embattled Hare Krishna commune near the commercial capital Almaty, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Local villagers, hired on 19 March "for good wages" by the local authority, began demolishing more Hare Krishna homes with crow bars and sledge hammers. An electrician also began disconnecting the electricity supply, to prepare for complete demolition.

However, Forum 18 was told by Hare Krishna sources, "a person in a black Mercedes Benz car" arrived who arrived, who ordered the demolition to stop. The demolition squad then departed. A reporter told Hare Krishna devotees that the Karasai District Executors office had claimed to him that the demolition will resume in five days (see F18News 20 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=934).

Official pressure on the Hare Krishna commune has been steadily increasing this year. Thirteen Hare Krishna-owned homes were bulldozed in November 2006 (see F18News 24 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=876), with the homes of other Hare Krishna devotees being targeted for demolition and further court cases pending.

Despite denying any religious motives to the moves against the commune, Amanbek Mukhashev defended the inclusion of Muslim and Orthodox clergy in the official Commission charged with examining the dispute: "The population of Karasai district is basically Orthodox and Muslim and it follows that we should have regard for the views of the representatives of these faiths" (see F18News 31 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=905).

It is unclear who stands to benefit from the attacks on the Hare Krishna commune. Sources which preferred to be unnamed have told Forum 18 of "persistent rumours" that Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's brother, Bulat Nazarbayev, wants to acquire the Krishna property. The sources told Forum 18 that "it is practically impossible to prove it. Even if Bulat Nazarbayev were to privatise the Krishna farm he would do it through other people." (see F18News 17 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=872). Local officials are also themselves suspected of standing to benefit financially. Official hostility to religious freedom and personal greed are not incompatible motivations.

By 2 February, 13 of the 66 original Hare Krishna-owned homes had already confiscated and destroyed and three more were threatened with demolition on that day, with officials also challenging the Hare Krishna commune's ownership of an adjacent 47.7 hectare (118 acre) farm. Commune members are wondering who will acquire the property, which they vehemently assert has been illegally seized from them. In late January "officials trying to close the Hare Krishna farm" had been included as members of the horticultural collective, Maksim Varfolomeyev of the Hare Krishna community complained to Forum 18 on 30 January. "Judging by all that's happened, these people will end up with the devotees' land."

But the chief religious affairs specialist of the Karasai district administration, Ryskul Zhunisbayeva, dismissed any complaints. "Officials are equally residents of Karasai district and therefore have the right to join the Ptitsevod collective," she told Forum 18 on 30 January.

It is now certain that people with official connections – who have no previous connection with the land and whose identity remains

unclear – have now become involved in "buying" the Hare Krishna commune's land. At the concluding meeting of the Commission on 22 December, officials declared that privatisation of private plots would be resumed. Although Hare Krishna devotees have applied to buy land as part of this process, all their applications have been refused.

Plots being "sold" - without the consent of the legal owners – include plots on which previously bulldozed homes of Hare Krishna devotees stood. On Sunday 28 January, an official from the Land Committee Anatoli Portnyagin, the lawyer of the Hakim (district administration chief), a police officer from the Hakimat, and the voted-out former leader of the horticultural commune, Irina Zakharchuk, were "selling" land plots. Witnesses reported that these people "fell into hot disputes that turned into shouting". The identity of the new "owners" remains at present unclear.

On 29 January, Hare Krishna sources reported that one of their members has a plot and house which is slated for destruction and approached a relative in the KNB secret police for help. The KNB have previously been involved in the case (see F18News 26 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=769). The KNB relative replied that "it was no use as they know who has taken control of the property."

Zakharchuk, head of the Ptitsvod horticultural collective, claimed to Forum 18 on 20 February that it was "simply nonsense to say that any state officials joined our farming cooperative after the Krishna cottages had been confiscated." She has been one of the Hare Krishna communities most outspoken critics, but flatly denied that she "has anything against the Krishna followers." But she went on to claim that it was "no surprise that they are the first to have their cottages confiscated. The aim of our agricultural land is to grow fruit and vegetables. The Krishna followers have virtually turned their cottages into monasteries. This means they are not using the farmland as it was intended.

Despite the complications of the case, it is clear that officials have been using illegal methods.

"Under Kazakh law the cottage owners have to use their plots of land for their designated purpose of growing fruit and vegetables," Kazakh law professor Roman Podoprigora, told Forum 18 on 21 February. "However," he continued, "the punishment for breaking this rule is a fine, not confiscation of the cottages." In Professor Podoprigora's view, the dispute "is an over-complicated mess. It is an open battle for land, with religion as its underlying cause." He also thinks that there are elements of a "personal dispute between the Krishna followers and Zakharchuk, the head of the Ptitsvod horticultural collective."

Religious minorities of all faiths are under increasing pressure, with a harsh new Religion Law being prepared (see F18News 21 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=916). Unregistered communities, such as some Baptist and Pentecostal churches, along with Muslim missionaries, are being targeted in what one official described to Forum 18 as "the fight against terrorism and religious groups without registration" (see F18News 28 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=921). Baptist pastor Pastor Fauzi Gubaidullin was on 7 March jailed for three days for leading an unregistered Baptist church (see F18News 13 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=931). (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>

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