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KAZAKHSTAN: Authorities pressure legal Hare Krishna commune

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Even though they abide fully by Kazakhstan's laws, members of a Hare Krishna commune outside the commercial capital Almaty have told Forum 18 News Service that they have been subjected to a series of investigations, during which police and procuracy officials have stated their determination to expel the community. The authorities have categorically denied to Forum 18 that they are pursuing a deliberate policy against the Hare Krishna community. However the horticultural association, on whose land the Hare Krishna commune is situated, have come under heavy pressure from the authorities to make a statements against the community. The Hare Krishna community intends to defend vigorously its right to protection from "such pseudo-guardians of the law".

In the wake of a series of raids and pressure on members of a Hare Krishna commune in Karasai district on the outskirts of Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty, the head of the Council of the Hare Krishna Community in Kazakhstan has accused the local authorities of trying to drive the Hare Krishna community out of the district. Sergei Kornilov told Forum 18 News Service on 8 December that a raid on the community in early November formed part of this "deliberate policy". But Zhanas Amanbayev of the Karasai district procuracy - who took part in the November raid - categorically denied to Forum 18 that the authorities were pursuing a deliberate policy against the Hare Krishna community.

Amanbayev visited the commune on 2 November together with fellow procuracy official Yesen Ustelbayev and immigration officials. Kornilov reported that the officials rounded up members of the Hare Krishna community, claiming to be conducting a passport investigation. In spite of repeated requests, the officials failed to present any written order conferring the right to carry out any investigation, and after taking the passports of two people (who were properly registered) they left.

On the same day Ustelbayev and Amanbayev literally burst in on the head of the horticultural association on whose land the Hare Krishna commune is situated. They put psychological and moral pressure on her to give evidence against the Hare Krishna community and its members, threatening her with a search and accusing her of protecting and conniving with the Hare Krishna community.

Kornilov maintains that everyone who wants to join the horticultural association now has to give the Karasai technical inventory bureau a written declaration that he or she is not a member of the Hare Krishna community. Only then are applications accepted for processing. One of the bureau officials reportedly told Kornilov privately that this was an unwritten order from above.

According to Kornilov, procuracy officials continue to "terrorise" the head of the horticultural association, demanding that she should provide evidence against members of the Hare Krishna community. Ustelbayev said in an informal chat on 5 November that he would do all he could to bring a criminal case against her. On 14 November, she was summoned to the Karasai procuracy, where officials told her they had no quarrel with her personally, but needed just one thing: that she should write something smearing the members of the Hare Krishna community. Otherwise, she was told, they would raid the horticultural association's land.

Amanbayev of the Karasai district procuracy insisted that the 2 November investigation was routine. "There are always foreigners living on the Hare Krishna commune, and under Kazakh law foreigners visiting Kazakhstan must register with the police," he told Forum 18 on 8 December. "That is why we carried out a routine planned investigation into their observation of the passport regime." Amanbayev also said that the procuracy had received "alarm signals" about the head of the horticultural association.

Then Amanbayev suddenly changed the tone of his conversation with Forum 18. "I am not going to say any more to you. Such discussions should not be conducted over the telephone. And after all, how do I know that you really are a journalist? If you want information from us, come and see us, or send us an official list of questions."

Although the Hare Krishna community was registered in Karasai district in May 2002, Kornilov complains that since that time the procuracy and district police have launched a "veritable persecution" of it. Over the past six months they have several times undergone all possible investigations, during which officials at the procuracy and the police have openly declared that they would make every effort to expel the Hare Krishna community from the district. He added that officials generally fail to present any documents conferring the right to carry out investigations and speak to people in a rough, condescending and insulting manner.

"We are trying to be law-abiding citizens and to be governed entirely by the laws imposed on us by the state, one of which is the right to freedom of conscience," Kornilov told Forum 18. He insisted that his community's activity, like that of all religious confessions, is permitted by the country's religion law and other legal documents. "We operate within the limits of these laws."

But he stressed that the Hare Krishna community intends to defend vigorously its right to be protected "from any kind of extortion, blackmail and other unlawful actions on the part of certain citizens, whatever position they may hold". Kornilov said they have already appealed for protection from "such pseudo-guardians of the law" over various incidents, but with no positive result. "Every time our declarations and appeals have either ended up at the same Karasai procuracy for investigation or we have received a short and laconic reply declaring that nothing unlawful in the actions of procuracy officials has been established."

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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