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KAZAKHSTAN: "Tolerance" in Bucharest, Krishna temple ordered demolished in Almaty

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

As senior Kazakh officials arrive in Romania for an OSCE conference on combating discrimination, the local administration chief ordered members of the embattled Hare Krishna near Almaty to demolish their own temple and other buildings within ten days. "If we don't do it, the authorities will," Hare Krishna spokesperson Maksim Varfolomeyev told Forum 18 News Service. Another 14 Hare Krishna-owned homes are already under threat of demolition in the latest moves in the authorities' three-year campaign to destroy the commune. The government's religious affairs chief Yeraly Tugzhanov – on his way to the OSCE conference – refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions about the threatened destruction of the temple. He likewise refused to discuss the heavy fines imposed in Atyrau on six Jehovah's Witnesses for meeting for worship without state registration.

As senior officials from Kazakhstan arrive in the Romanian capital Bucharest for the opening tomorrow (7 June) of the Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding organised by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the authorities back at home are preparing to demolish a Hare Krishna temple and have heavily fined six Jehovah's Witnesses for meeting for worship without state registration, Forum 18 News Service has learned.

The local authorities of the Karasai district near Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty have told the embattled Hare Krishna commune to destroy their temple and other buildings located on their farm within ten days. "We received the document from the Karasai district Hakim (administration) today ordering us to demolish these buildings ourselves," the spokesperson for the devotees, Maksim Varfolomeyev, told Forum 18 on 6 June. "If we don't do it, the authorities will."

The order to destroy the Hare Krishna owned property coincided with massive fines imposed on six Jehovah's Witnesses on 4 June for meeting without official registration in the Caspian Sea port of Atyrau in western Kazakhstan (see F18News 7 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=972). Atyrau's Jehovah's Witness community, which has been seeking legal status in vain for six years, was raided by prosecutor's office officials in early May (see F18News 24 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=962).

Members of Baptist churches which refuse on principle to seek official registration are also routinely given heavy fines and even several days' imprisonment (see F18News 11 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=954).

The timing of the order to destroy the Hare Krishna temple and the heavy fines on Jehovah's Witnesses is embarrassing for the authorities. Yeraly Tugzhanov, the head of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, and Bolat Baikadamov, the Human Rights Ombudsperson, are among Kazakhstan's delegation to the OSCE conference.

Forum 18 reached Tugzhanov in Istanbul on 6 June while he was on his way to Bucharest. However, he declined to answer Forum 18's questions about the planned demolition of the Hare Krishna-owned property and the big fines on the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Forum 18 reached his deputy, Amanbek Mukhashev, who was visiting Almaty, but when Forum 18 asked why the order has been issued to destroy the Hare Krishna temple and other buildings the line was cut. Mukhashev's mobile phone was then switched off. No other Religious Affairs Committee official would comment on the latest threat to the Hare Krishna commune.

Over the past three years, the authorities have been determined to destroy 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. The commune originally had 66 Hare Krishna-owned homes, plus the 47.7-hectare (118 acre) farm. Amid an international outcry, the authorities bulldozed 13 of the 66 homes in November 2006 and have repeatedly threatened to resume demolitions, most recently in early May (see F18News 4 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=952).

The letter dated 5 June announcing the imminent demolition of the temple and other farm buildings (of which Forum 18 has seen a copy) was signed by the Hakim (head of administration), Bolat-bi Kutpanov. Although it does not specifically mention the temple, it calls on the devotees to demolish within ten days "all illegally erected buildings" on the farm site, "including a residential house, a

cowshed etc." The Hare Krishna commune's temple is located in the farmhouse.

Varfolomeyev of the Hare Krishna community vigorously rejects Kutpanov's assertion that any buildings on the farm were put up illegally. "When we bought the farm from the previous owner in 1999 the buildings were already there," he told Forum 18. "All we have built since then is an extension to the kitchen of the farmhouse – and we had permission for that."

The Hare Krishna devotees insist the order is also illegal because the Hakim does not have the right to order the demolition of buildings, and the court decisions he cites refer only to the land, not to the demolition of the buildings on them. They told Forum 18 they intend to appeal against the order to the district prosecutor's office and the Almaty regional Hakim.

As the temple is the legal address for the Hare Krishna community, the devotees also fear that if the building is destroyed the religious community itself will automatically have its legal status liquidated. Under Kazakhstan's restrictive religious laws – which contradict international human rights norms – unregistered religious activity is banned and routinely punished with heavy fines.

Kutpanov, the Hakim, was unavailable on 6 June. His office told Forum 18 he was travelling in the district. Likewise his deputy, Tusupov, was also out of the office. Curiously – given the local Hakim's repeated insistence that the moves against the Hare Krishna commune are unrelated to its members' religious affiliation – Tusupov's office referred Forum 18 to Ryskul Zhunisbayeva, senior officer of the department of internal affairs who supervises religious affairs. However, her telephone went unanswered on 6 June. Her boss, Gulnara Sultanova, told Forum 18 that she knew nothing about the issue and referred Forum 18 back to Zhunisbayeva.

Varfolomeyev told Forum 18 that 14 more Hare Krishna-owned homes are due for demolition "at any time". On 29 May, the senior bailiff of Karasai District, Baichapanov, ordered the electricity to be disconnected from the 14 homes for one day "because of house demolition scheduled for 29 May".

However, electricity was cut off not to the 14 threatened homes, but to the farm instead, Varfolomeyev told Forum 18. The supply was cut off at 6.15 am without any warning and in the absence of the community's members, leaving some fifty devotees and the entire farm without electricity or water. "The lights just went off and the water pumps stopped," he complained. "The faithful were put into a state of anxiety, the activities of the community were interrupted as everybody gravely waited for house destruction to begin. Fortunately, no houses were demolished on that day. However the electricity was not connected either."

The Hare Krishna devotees accused the Karasai district power station's director, Mirzagali Taukebayev, of "arbitrary behaviour" in cutting off the farm's electricity. It was not restored until the afternoon of 5 June. "Our people were left with no power or water for eight days," Varfolomeyev complained.

The latest moves follow a decision by Kazakhstan's Supreme Court on 8 May which overturned a July 2005 ruling in favour of the Hare Krishna devotees which had backed their right to use the farm and register their ownership with the district authorities.

The Hare Krishna community had taken its case to the Supreme Court after a decision of the Almaty regional court in November 2006 annulling the sales and purchase agreement between the Society for Krishna Consciousness and the previous owner. "The Society for Krishna Consciousness was invited neither to the district nor to the regional court hearings," the devotees complained. "Thus the decisions of the courts of first and second instances were taken without representatives of the Society."

The Hare Krishna community has been talking to national and local officials about the authorities' suggestion to move the commune to another location in Almaty Region. However, the devotees remain sceptical about the authorities' sincerity. They point out that at a meeting with Tugzhanov of the Religious Affairs Committee on 18 May, Tugzhanov promised Hare Krishna representatives that an alternative site would be provided by 26 May. No site has been provided.

Devotees maintain that it is possible the authorities are merely "creating the image" of actively resolving the issue, "whereas in reality no-one is planning to resolve anything". They say the Hakim's latest order is evidence of this.

"At the moment there is no alternative location," Hare Krishna devotees told Forum 18. "And as long as no alternative site is provided there will simply be nowhere for the Krishna temple, as well as 50 devotees and 30 cows to go." (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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