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KAZAKHSTAN: Justice official "grossly distorting the facts"

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Vidya Volkova, head of the Hare Krishna community in Kazakhstan, has told Forum 18 News Service that the deputy head of the Almaty regional justice department, Murat Tanirbergenov, was "grossly distorting the facts" about the land ownership of the only Hare Krishna farming commune in the CIS. Volkova showed Forum 18 legal documents proving ownership, and Tanirbergenov has now backtracked to Forum 18 about some claims he made to a local news agency, saying "we were just generalising about the facts but later, if the procuracy finds it necessary to bring a case, the court will decide on the issue of closing the Krishna commune." Tanirbergenov stood by claims he made - disputed by the commune - that they fail to meet hygiene and fire safety standards and trade illegally. This is the first time that the authorities have officially - as against unofficially - raised the possibility of closing down the Hare Krishna farm, which has been put under pressure since its foundation.

Speaking to Forum 18 News Service, the deputy head of the Almaty regional justice department, Murat Tanirbergenov, has backtracked over claims he made to a local news agency in December about a Hare Krishna farming commune in a suburb of Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty that the authorities are targeting for closure. He admitted he had been wrong to assert that the Krishna devotees had acquired the land for the commune illegally, but insisted they are breaking the law by failing to meet hygiene and fire safety standards and trading illegally. "We were just generalising about the facts but later, if the procuracy finds it necessary to bring a case, the court will decide on the issue of closing the Krishna commune," he told Forum 18 on 9 January from Taldy-Kurgan, the administrative centre of Almaty region. "But - at least for now - no-one has taken concrete steps to close it. I believe the Krishna followers have been premature in shouting about this to the whole world."

In the interview with the Kazakhstan Today news agency on 23 December, Tanirbergenov had stated that the department of justice and law enforcement agencies are working together to close down the commune, based in Karasai (formerly Kaskelen) district of Almaty region. He said members of the Pitsevod horticultural cooperative, on whose land the Krishna farm is situated, sent the regional akim (administration head) a collective complaint about the "unlawful activities and extremist tendencies" of the Krishna devotees. The authorities have previously pressured the head of the Pitsevod horticultural cooperative to testify against the Hare Krishna commune (see F18News 10 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=209).

Tanirbergenov told the agency that an inspection of the Society for Krishna Consciousness did not uncover any signs of "extremist activities", but did find other instances of law-breaking. He claimed the Krishna devotees had obtained the land by unlawful means and were carrying out unlawful construction work. The regional procuracy also found the law being broken in other ways, he asserted. For example, hygiene at the Krishna commune failed to meet basic standards and fire safety standards had not been met. The investigation had also discovered two black market confectionery shops. All these illegal activities formed the basis for raising the issue of closing down the Hare Krishna community, he told the agency.

The head of the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Kazakhstan, Vidya (Valentina) Volkova, accused Tanirbergenov of "grossly distorting the facts" when he spoke to Kazakhstan Today. She showed Forum 18 an official document showing that the land had been bought for the personal ownership of one of the members of the Krishna community. "This is the land that Tanirbergenov was referring to," she told Forum 18 in Almaty on 8 January. "But as you see, we have an official document showing that the land has been bought for our personal ownership."

Volkova also rejected the other accusations against the commune, explaining that the Hare Krishna devotees were operating confectionery shops which distributed goods to community members free of charge. "These shops can't by any means be considered black market shops," she told Forum 18. "We don't operate them commercially but simply give our fellow believers, free of charge, food that we cannot buy in shops here." She said that members of the hygiene commission had made "absolutely absurd demands" of the Krishna devotees, such as instructing them not to eat while seated on the ground.

Volkova maintains that the Krishna commune has faced constant inspections since August 2004 and that individual devotees have been the targets of "gross provocation". She claimed that the director of the Pitsevod cooperative hung the severed head of a cow over his gate. This is offensive to Krishna followers, who regard the cow as a sacred animal. Moreover, Volkova believes that the persecution of the Krishna devotees has the approval of the local authorities. She said that in the five years the commune has existed, the district akim (administrative head), Kutpanov, has not even once agreed to meet commune members.

The Krishna farming commune - the only such Krishna commune in the whole of the CIS - was registered in May 2002. Relations between the Krishna devotees and the local authorities have been strained since the very beginning. Throughout this time, the commune has been subjected to an extraordinary range of official inspections, during which procuracy officials and police have openly said they would do everything they could to drive the Krishna devotees out of the Karasai district (see F18News 10 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=209). However, this is the first time that the authorities have raised at an official level the possibility of closing down the communal farm.

For more background, see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249

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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