

Spanish 'persecuting' expatriates over homes

"Hundreds of Britons fear that they could lose their homes on the Costas in what they claim is an "out-and-out persecution" of the expatriate community.

From Fiona Govan in Vera, Telegraph, 19th January 2008

Residents' groups are planning demonstrations outside their town halls over the coming weeks to demand that the homes they bought in good faith are declared safe against an offensive by Spanish authorities to demolish property built illegally.

Among those affected are John and Christine Bull, who sold their family home in Goring-on-Sea, in West Sussex, four years ago to start their retirement on the Costa Almeria in southern Spain.

But they believe their home, a modest three-bedroom bungalow in landscaped gardens three miles inland from the Mediterranean, is next in line for the wrecker's ball. "I doubt very much that we will be here next year," said Mr Bull, 66, as he surveyed the property that has cost them £200,000 just outside the town of Vera.



Last week they watched as a demolition crew tore down the home of their neighbours, Len and Helen Prior, after the regional government of Andalusia revoked the building licence issued by the town hall. "When they did that the authorities were sending a message and we got it loud and clear," said Mr Bull, who says his house is next on the demolition list.

"We are consulting lawyers and have spoken to the mayor but there seems to be nothing we can do to stop the order. They think that because we are foreigners our rights can be ignored. But we intend to make a lot of noise about it." Next weekend the Bulls will be among thousands expected to demonstrate outside the local town hall calling for justice.

"Just like the Priors we did everything possible to get permission to build our home and we were assured that our house was legal," said Mrs Bull. "We weren't duped into anything and there is no suggestion of corruption. But it seems we are caught in a battle between the local council and the regional government."

But the problems are not confined to Vera and the issue has sent shockwaves across the expatriate community of Spain, where as many as a million Britons are thought to own property. Along the coast from Vera is Mojacar, which has an expatriate population of 50 per cent. "It is out-and-out persecution of the expat community," said Lenox Napier, 55, a 40-year resident of Mojacar and the secretary of the Ciudadanos Europeos Party, which will lead the demonstrations next week.

"No one wants to say that without foreign investment in this area the Spanish would still be growing tomatoes and riding around on donkeys but it is true. They think expats like the Priors are an easy target but they haven't thought of the message they are sending out.

"There is already a slump in real estate in the region and thousands of newly built homes are standing empty and this latest news has served as a nail in the coffin. Who will want to buy in Spain now?" But a spokesman from the Spanish Embassy in London urged the Priors' case to be taken in context.

"There has been one case of a British expat to have their home knocked down. It's an isolated case out of tens of thousands of British people who continue to enjoy living in Spain and should be taken as such," said the spokesman.

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