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SLOVENIA: Registration breakthrough for minority faiths

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Fifteen months after applying for registration, the Calvary Chapel Protestant church in Celje became on 7 August the first new religious community to be granted registration in Slovenia since 1999. The registration of the Tibetan Buddhist Dharmaling association followed on 22 August. The head of the government's Office for Religious Communities, Drago Cepar, who until this month had refused to register any new communities, met Hindu leader Natasa Sivic on 25 August. "He promised to register us this week," she told Forum 18 News Service. "It has been a big problem not having registration." The Hindus have been waiting for registration for seventeen months.

On 7 August, after a fifteen month wait, the Calvary Chapel Protestant church in the eastern Slovenian town of Celje became the first new religious community to be granted registration in the country since 1999. "We now have the rights to function as an official religious community," the church's pastor Justin Gerry told Forum 18 News Service on 27 August. "This provides us the opportunity to represent ourselves openly in the community as a group with official standing." The Tibetan Buddhist Dharmaling association received registration on 22 August, while the Hindu community is expecting registration imminently.

Natasa Sivic, a leader of the Hindu community, told Forum 18 on 27 August that she had met the head of the government's Office for Religious Communities, Drago Cepar, in the capital Ljubljana two days earlier. "He promised to register us this week," she reported. The Hindu community, which has existed for eight years, lodged its first registration application with the Office in March 2002.

Asked whether registration would end the Hindus' problems, Sivic responded: "We will see. It has been a big problem not having registration." However, she said the community was already building a small temple in a private flat in Ljubljana and would be able to follow suit in other towns, including Maribor and Celje. She said there were more than a thousand Hindus or people interested in Hinduism in Slovenia.

Cepar had long insisted that he was unable to register any religious communities as the law did not spell out criteria to determine which groups constituted religious communities (see F18News 18 June 2003). "There was an unofficial moratorium ever since Dr Cepar took office in 2000," Pastor Gerry told Forum 18.

Sivic said Cepar seemed more relaxed during their meeting about registering religious communities. She believed a June letter from Mirko Bandelj, general secretary of the government, instructing Cepar to register all waiting communities, was crucial. "He said it is now not his problem to worry about, so there is no longer any difficulty about registering communities." She also believed Forum 18's articles had contributed to breaking through the impasse.

Also pushing for an end to the registration obstruction was the ombudsman's office, which is headed by Matjaz Hanzek. "Our office played a great role in the registrations, first through letters to Mr Cepar and then through constant exposition of this issue in the media," spokesperson Barbara Samaluk told Forum 18 from Ljubljana on 27 August.

Gerry said his church, affiliated with Calvary Chapel in the United States and the only affiliated congregation in Slovenia, has 20 regular active participants, though more attend services. It applied for registration with the Office for Religious Communities in person in April 2002. Cepar visited the church on 27 July of this year, three days after it was informed its application had been filed. On 7 August the church was officially notified of its registration. The Office gave no explanation of why the application had been held up for fifteen months.

"After several letters to human rights representatives and to the government of Slovenia, and after the very useful reports from Forum 18, Dharmaling has been finally registered as the Buddhist Religious Community," the abbot of the Dharmaling Buddhist community, Gelong Shenphen, told Forum 18 from Ljubljana on 27 August. The association was formed last December and formally lodged its registration application in January. It too received no explanation for the delay in gaining registration.

The registration of Calvary Chapel and the Dharmaling community have already been noted on the Office for Religious Communities website (<http://www.gov.si/uvs>).

Forum 18 has been unable to identify the other seven or so religious communities believed to be waiting for registration. The ombudsman's office has identified one of them as the Stoic Pantheists, but told Forum 18 it does not know the identity of the others. Cepar – who was unavailable by telephone on 27 August - has declined to identify them to Forum 18. Nor have local journalists, who have widely covered the registration obstruction.

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