

27 January 2004

BELARUS: Krishna devotees under pressure

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Authorities in Belarus have been briefly detaining Krishna devotees two or three times a week for distributing religious literature, as well as obstructing literature distribution in other ways, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Separately, the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Belarus has asked the UN Human Rights Committee to investigate the legality of the states' refusal to register the organisation under the previous religion law. Vasili Marchenko, the official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region, told Forum 18 that a local Hare Krishna community had not been denied re-registration under the new religion law, and that he had not received any such application. This is disputed by a devotee, who told Forum 18 that the community's re-registration documents had been returned without explanation. In October 1997, the Belarusian State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs' Expert Council described the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness as a "destructive totalitarian sect infringing personality, health, citizens' rights and national security."

Incidents in which Krishna devotees are briefly detained for distributing religious literature occur two or three times a week in Belarus, according to the head of their Minsk community, Sergei Malakhovsky. Annual requests for permission to distribute religious literature at various sites receive the same brief response from each of the Belarusian capital's nine administrative districts, he told Forum 18 News Service: "The location is deemed inappropriate."

Their action consequently rendered illegal, Malakhovsky continued on 25 January, Krishna devotees are regularly detained briefly by local police, less frequently fined up to 20 US Dollars (= 43,330 Belarusian Roubles, 137 Norwegian Kroner, or 16 Euros) or, if they are Russian citizens, ordered to leave Belarus. In accordance with the republic's 2002 law on religion, Krishna devotees have the right – if they obtain permission – to distribute religious literature only within the limits of the cities where they are currently registered: Minsk, Grodno (Hrodna), Gomel (Homyel'), Brest, Vitebsk (Vitsyebesk) and Bobruisk (Babruysk). If they attempt to distribute it elsewhere, remarked Malakhovsky, they are commonly ordered to leave town by police.

The leader of the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness also told Forum 18 that its members are permitted to hold religious processions only in an isolated location in the Belarusian capital, for which the municipal authorities charge 100 US Dollars (if on a weekday) [= 216,652 Belarusian Roubles, 682 Norwegian Kroner, or 79 Euros] or 300 US Dollars (if at a weekend) [= 650,001 Belarusian Roubles, 2,046 Norwegian Kroner, or 237 Euros] for related police, health and sanitation arrangements. So far, however, police have turned a blind eye to the small, unapproved summer processions through central Minsk streets which the community holds instead, he remarked.

Malakhovsky confirmed to Forum 18 that the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Belarus has asked the United Nations Human Rights Committee to evaluate the legality of the state authorities' refusal to register the organisation at the republican level under the previous law on religion. Krishna devotees in Belarus are unable to meet the present law's conditions for this status, he explained, since they do not have at least 10 communities including a minimum of one which has been in existence for 20 years or more. Under the same law, the group's existing communities do not have the right..to invite foreign spiritual leaders or create their own media publications as a result. While their foreign spiritual leaders are able to visit Belarus informally, said Malakhovsky, "we can't rent a public hall for their lectures or publicise the visits in any way." The 500 active Krishna devotees in Minsk currently produce only 300 copies of a religious publication for internal use, he said, since a higher circulation is subject to state registration.

Due to difficulties acquiring a valid legal address, Malakhovsky said that the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Belarus has so far applied to re-register only three of its communities under the 2002 religion law. While those in Grodno and Gomel have already re-registered successfully, he said, those in Brest simply had their documents returned to them and were denied further explanation. On 27 January, Forum 18 sought confirmation from the official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region, Vasili Marchenko, who maintained that the Brest Hare Krishna community had not been denied re-registration and that he had not received any such application: "We have no problem with Krishna devotees." Unable to locate Sergei Malakhovsky, Forum 18 was told later the same day by another devotee in Minsk that the Brest community's re-registration documents had been returned to them without explanation within the past few weeks. When devotees asked officials what was wrong with the application, he said, they were reportedly told that the Council for Religious Affairs was "not a consultative organ."

Commenting that Forum 18 had previously distorted information that he had provided, the chairman of the Belarusian State

Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Stanislav Buko, stated on 27 January that he would issue a written answer to a question relating to the Krishna devotees' situation in the republic within ten days. In October 1997 the committee's Expert Council – of which Buko is not a member – issued an analysis of the activity of the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness which concluded that the organisation was a "destructive totalitarian sect infringing personality, health, citizens' rights and the national security of the Republic of Belarus."

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom

survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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