

10 June 2003

TURKMENISTAN: Crackdown widens to Hare Krishna community

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The crackdown against Protestant congregations in Turkmenistan has now widened to include the Hare Krishna community. Within a two day period in late May, two Hare Krishna meetings were raided by the authorities. During the raid in a village near Mari, officials confined themselves to filming the devotees, but in the capital Ashgabad, the raid was more severe. Hare Krishna sources told Forum 18 News Service that three devotees were detained, one was badly beaten and two were fined. One was threatened with a criminal case, while another was threatened with deportation from the capital. But the policeman who led the raid, Colonel Byashim Taganov, denied all involvement. "I know nothing about the incident," he told Forum 18.

The crackdown against Protestant congregations in Turkmenistan has now widened to include the Hare Krishna community. Within a two day period in late May, two Hare Krishna meetings were raided by the authorities. During the raid in a village near the town of Mari in eastern Turkmenistan, officials confined themselves to filming the devotees, but in the capital Ashgabad, the raid was more severe. Hare Krishna sources have told Forum 18 News Service that three devotees were detained, one was badly beaten and two were fined. One was threatened with a criminal case, while another was threatened with deportation from the capital.

On 27 May, a 15-strong operational group from the Ashgabad city division of the Internal Affairs Ministry raided the home of a female devotee, Gaurabhakta devi dasi, Hare Krishna sources told Forum 18. The house used to be the Hare Krishna temple in Ashgabad until it was closed down by the authorities. During the raid, which was led by Colonel Byashim Taganov, the three residents Varshana dasa (Vitali Yefremovtsev), Mishra Bhagavan dasa (Marat Urayev) and Gaurabhakta devi dasi were arrested.

The operational group arrived in seven cars at 5.30 a.m. They entered the residence as the three were praying. The entry and subsequent search were conducted without any legal documents.

Hare Krishna sources told Forum 18 that the officers filmed everyone and everything in the house. They removed the icons from the altar, took away all items of worship and all religious books. "They made profuse use of abusive language," sources added. The officers ordered the devotees to reveal where other Hare Krishna devotees lived, but the devotees refused to tell them. Colonel Taganov told them they intended to find out where the devotees lived and "repress them in a similar fashion".

In attempting to extract information from Mishra Bhagavan, the police beat him so hard that they drew blood. Then Varshana dasa and Mishra Bhagavan were taken to a holding centre. The next morning they were taken from there to the Chindigin district court in Ashgabad. At a closed legal hearing Urayev and Yefremovtsev were handed down a fine of some 10 US dollars each under the code of administrative offences. After the court hearing the police warned Urayev, who had previously been punished under the administrative code, that if he did not stop his religious activity, a criminal case would be brought against him and he would serve "several years" in prison.

"I take these threats very seriously," Urayev told Forum 18 from Mari. "Basically, the only way for me not to end up in prison is to seek asylum in another country." Gaurabhakta devi dasi was not taken to prison, but the local authorities have indicated that they will initiate proceedings against her, that her private home will be confiscated and that she will be removed from Ashgabad and sent to another city.

A similar event occurred during the Narsimha celebration on 26 May in the village of Budenovsky near Mari. Fifteen officials of the local authority came to the celebration ceremony and filmed everyone and everything. But nobody was arrested and nothing was confiscated. The devotees from Mari say that now there is no repression in Mari and that "everything is quiet".

Police colonel Taganov flatly denied that he had led the raid on a Hare Krishna community. "I know nothing about the incident," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabad on 9 June. Urayev found his claim difficult to believe. "That is very strange," he told Forum 18 on 9 June. "I spoke with Taganov at some length. I cannot believe that he has forgotten personally interrogating me and my fellow devotees." Forum 18's telephone call on 9 June to the holding centre in Ashgabad was also fruitless. The duty officer, who did not introduce himself, said "we do not give information about detainees over the telephone".

The Turkmenistan authorities have refused to allow any non-Muslim or non-Russian Orthodox communities to register. It treats all

unregistered religious activity as illegal and periodically punishes those involved in it. Religious activity is supervised by the 6th department of the National Security Committee (KNB, former KGB), the police and the local authorities. In addition to the two raids on Hare Krishna devotees, at least seven Protestant congregations were raided across Turkmenistan in May (see F18News 6 June 2003).

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY