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UZBEKISTAN: Hare Krishna followers having lunch "not forbidden"?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Uzbek authorities in the east of the country, in Ferghana, are preventing Hare Krishna followers from privately meeting together to exercise their faith, Forum 18 News Service has learnt, amongst other ways by imposing a fines of seven times the minimum monthly wage. One official commented that "even 4-5 people do not have the right to conduct religious meetings without informing the authorities" and that "Having lunch together is not forbidden in Uzbekistan, but we need to clarify whether the Krishna devotees' lunch in Fergana was really just that".

On 2 January 2003 five Krishna devotees were meeting at the flat of Lyudmila Pudovkina when six officials, including representatives of the SNB (the former KGB) and the police, raided the flat. They immediately began filming the Krishna worship with a video camera and explained that they had been informed that meetings of an illegal religious organisation were taking place in the flat. On 14 January the Krishna devotees were summoned to the Kergelinsky district court and Lyudmila Pudovkina was fined seven times the minimum monthly wage (= 22,000 Som, 163 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros, or US\$ 23) under article 240 of the administrative code (violation of the legislation on religious organisations).

On 16 January four Krishna devotees met together for lunch at Natalya Dozorova's flat. However, literally within five minutes the same group of officials as on 12 January entered the flat. "We really were just meeting for lunch," Dozorova told Forum 18. "So we told our uninvited guests they should be ashamed of themselves and they apparently understood, said they were sorry and left." However, after a few days the local policeman started coming regularly to the Krishna devotees demanding that they come to the court and pay a fine under article 240. "We refused to do so, as we believed and still believe that having lunch together is not a criminal act," said Dozorova. "But the authorities kept up the pressure on us. In April I gave up everything and moved to Tashkent. Although the Krishna devotees who remained in Fergana are no longer being summoned to court they are afraid to meet each other".

"I have heard nothing about Krishna devotees having problems in Fergana," Kamil Kamalov, head of the Department for Non-Muslim Religions at the Uzbek Committee for Religious Affairs of the Uzbek government, told Forum 18 on 7 August. "The Hare Krishna society is registered in Tashkent and their leader has not said anything to me about problems of his fellow believers in Fergana. In any case, even 4-5 people do not have the right to conduct religious meetings without informing the authorities. If a religious community in a particular town has less than 100 members (i.e. the minimum number to achieve registration), the leaders of their central registered organisation should approach us requesting us to help stop the local authorities from preventing believers from meeting. Having lunch together is not forbidden in Uzbekistan, but we need to clarify whether the Krishna devotees' lunch in Fergana was really just that," said Kamalov.

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