
8 July 2003

TURKMENISTAN: Police "angry" at Forum 18 report of Hare Krishna raid

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Two Hare Krishna devotees suspected by a policeman in the capital Ashgabad of passing information out of Turkmenistan about a 27 May raid and subsequent fines are being hunted, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Colonel Byashim Taganov, who led the raid, has expressed his anger that news of the incident reached the outside world through Forum 18's report of 10 June and blames Varshana prabhu (Vitali Yefremovtsev) and Mishra Bhagavan prabhu (Marat Urayev). Although Colonel Taganov flatly denied to Forum 18 on 9 June that he had led the raid, after speaking to Forum 18 he launched an investigation into who had reported the raid and subsequent fines.

Colonel Byashim Taganov, who led a police raid on a house owned by a Hare Krishna devotee in the capital Ashgabad, has expressed his anger that news of the incident reached the outside world through Forum 18 News Service's report of 10 June. Pressure on Hare Krishna devotees has intensified. Forum 18 has learnt that Taganov summoned members of the Hare Krishna community and tried to establish the whereabouts of two leading members, Varshana prabhu (Vitali Yefremovtsev) and Mishra Bhagavan prabhu (Marat Urayev). He warned the devotees that he would arrest the two men because he believed they had passed on information about the raid.

On 27 May, a 15-strong operative group from the Ashgabad city division of the Internal Affairs Ministry raided the home of female devotee Gaurabhakta devi dasi. The house used to be the Hare Krishna temple in Ashgabad until it was closed down by the authorities. During the raid the three residents Varshana prabhu, Mishra Bhagavan prabhu and Gaurabhakta devi dasi were arrested. The entry and subsequent search were conducted without any legal documents.

Police officers filmed everyone and everything in the house and took away all items of worship and all religious books. In attempting to extract information from Mishra Bhagavan, the police beat him so hard that blood flowed. Then Varshana prabhu and Mishra Bhagavan were taken to a holding centre before being fined the following day at Ashgabad's Chindigin district court. After the hearing the police warned Mishra Bhagavan 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 (see F18News 10 June 2003).

Although Colonel Taganov had flatly denied on 9 June that he had led the raid, after speaking to Forum 18 he launched an investigation into who had reported the raid and subsequent fines to Forum 18.

The Turkmen authorities have refused to allow any non-Muslim or non-Russian Orthodox communities to register. Yet the law on religion does not ban meetings of members of unregistered religious associations.

Moreover, the constitutional law of Turkmenistan (no 27-II) signed by President Saparmurat Niyazov on 12 May 2000 bans searches in private homes, regarding these as "a symbol of the sanctity of the domestic hearth, ownership, family authority, and human honour, dignity and pride."

The law makes only limited exceptions. "A search may be allowed in exceptional circumstances in strict accordance with the law, where weapons, ammunition, explosive devices or significant quantities of drugs (over 5 kilograms) are being kept in places of residence. Additionally, a search may be conducted only with the permission of the regional, city or district commission, consisting of representatives of state agencies, public organisations and the law enforcement agencies."

Despite the questionable legal basis the government treats all unregistered religious activity as illegal, periodically raids private homes where religious meetings are taking place and punishes those involved in them. 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 two raids on Hare Krishna devotees (a community in a village near Mari was also raided about the same time as the Ashgabad raid), at least eight Protestant congregations have been raided across Turkmenistan since the beginning of May (see F18News 25 June 2003).

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