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TURKMENISTAN: Major Hare Krishna festival banned

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Banned since the spring from meeting in the house it rented for use as a temple in the wake of February and March police and secret police raids, the Hare Krishna community in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] was warned by officials not to hold celebrations on 17 and 18 April for Rama Navami, one of the most important Hare Krishna festivals of the year. "Our community can't meet at all now," Hare Krishna sources complained to Forum 18 News Service, "neither in the house, nor at the legal address. This is critical as religious communities can't meet in private homes and local authorities are afraid of renting property they own to religious communities as they don't want problems. So what can the community do?"

Officials warned the Hare Krishna community in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] not to hold celebrations on 17 and 18 April for the festival of Rama Navami, an annual celebration marking the appearance of Lord Sri Ramacandra and one of the most important Hare Krishna festivals. "Our community wanted to celebrate the festival," Hare Krishna sources who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 News Service on 25 April, "but was told it couldn't meet in the house it has been renting since last September." As religious meetings in private homes are banned, this meant that the Ashgabad community could not hold the celebration at all. The ban follows earlier police and National Security Ministry secret police raids on the community in February and March which halted all Hare Krishna worship in the capital despite the fact that the community is registered with the government.

The sources reported that a few days before the festival, officials from Ashgabad city administration summoned several local Hare Krishna leaders and told them that the community cannot meet until planned new government regulations have been produced and published. Officials complained that when the community rented the house last year it had declared that it would use the premises for business purposes but had violated this by using the house for religious meetings. (Ashgabad city administration issued a decree in July 2004 banning the renting of private homes and flats for business and religious purposes.)

"The local administration knew that our community was renting the house for religious purposes and made no objection," the sources insisted to Forum 18. "They could have intervened last year when the forms were being filled in, but they didn't. And the community paid the tax for one year in advance."

The Hare Krishna community had used the house, owned by female devotee Gaurabhakta devi dasi, as its temple until soon after the harsh new law on religion was adopted in 1996 and the community lost its official registration – along with all other non-Muslim and non-Russian Orthodox religious communities - in the compulsory re-registration in 1997. When the community finally achieved re-registration in summer 2004 it registered its legal address in a private flat.

However, officials banned the group from meeting at the legal address, so the community rented the house, paying the tax for one year of 1,200,000 manats (1,447 Norwegian kroner, 178 Euros or 230 US dollars at the vastly inflated official exchange rate) using contributions from community members. "The government's Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs had no objection to renting the house – it knew it would be used for religious purposes."

The community met at the house without obstacle for some six months before the police and secret police raids, during which they were ordered not to meet there again. When the Hare Krishna devotees asked the tax office to return half a year's tax they had already paid if the community could no longer rent the premises, the tax office refused.

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After the government allowed minority religious communities to register again last summer for the first time since 1997 it banned some of the newly-registered communities from holding any services. The Seventh-day Adventist and the Baptist communities in Ashgabad were both denied permission to meet for more than half a year after gaining registration. Many more religious minorities, as well as many Muslim communities, have still not been able to register (see F18News 22 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=548).

Up to about 70 Hare Krishna devotees would gather in Ashgabad to mark major festivals, community members told Forum 18, with perhaps two dozen on a weekly basis. A Hare Krishna community also meets in the Mari region east of the capital. In May 2003, the communities in Ashgabad and in the village of Budenovsky just outside the town of Mari were raided by police at a time of widespread raids on religious communities of a variety of faiths (see F18News 8 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=100).

The authorities used tractors to destroy the temple in Budenovsky in August 1999 as persecution of religious minorities was beginning to intensify. Three months later the authorities used bulldozers to destroy the Adventist church in Ashgabad. No religious communities that had places of worship destroyed or confiscated between 1999 and 2004 (including Muslim, Adventist, Baptist, Pentecostal or Hare Krishna communities) have had apologies or compensation for the destroyed buildings.

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=296

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at

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

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