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TURKMENISTAN: Hare Krishna devotee jailed for seven years

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Turkmenistan has today [17 November] jailed a Hare Krishna devotee, Cheper Annaniyazova, for seven years on charges of illegally leaving the country, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Before being sentenced, she was compulsorily detained in a psychiatric hospital. "Cheper tried to get an exit visa to go to Kazakhstan to stay in the temple in Almaty, but was refused," a source close to the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18. "She went anyway, crossing the border to Uzbekistan." Despite a claimed abolition of exit visas, Turkmenistan is to Forum 18's knowledge preventing three religious believers - two Protestants and a Hare Krishna devotee - from leaving the country. Forum 18's source insists that the heavy sentence was imposed at the behest of the MSS secret police to intimidate the Hare Krishna community. Turkmenistan also has the religious prisoner of conscience with the longest jail sentence in the former Soviet Union, former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah who is on a 22 year jail sentence.

One of the first converts to the Hare Krishna faith in Turkmenistan, Cheper Annaniyazova, was sentenced today (17 November) in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] to seven years' imprisonment for illegally crossing the border three years ago. "Cheper tried to get an exit visa to go to Kazakhstan to stay in the temple in Almaty, but was refused," a source close to the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 News Service. "She went anyway, crossing the border to Uzbekistan." But the source insists the heavy sentence was imposed at the behest of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police to intimidate the Hare Krishna community.

Annaniyazova stayed in Almaty until earlier this year, returning to Turkmenistan when her father fell ill. She arrived home in Ashgabad in May, just too late to see her father before his death. However, when the MSS secret police later discovered she had crossed the border illegally three years earlier she was summoned for interrogation. While admitting she had left without obtaining the necessary exit visa (these are claimed to have been abolished), Annaniyazova protested that many others who had done likewise were not being tried. She insisted she was being persecuted for being prominent in the Hare Krishna community. The Hare Krishna community, along with other religious believers, has experienced continuing persecution (see the F18News religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672). Born in 1968, Annaniyazova became a devotee in the late 1980s when Soviet controls on religion were loosened.

Despite the claim to have abolished exit visas, Turkmenistan still denies religious believers permission to leave the country and is currently barring two Protestants and a Hare Krishna devotee (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=685).

In early August Annaniyazova was compulsorily detained in a psychiatric hospital in Ashgabad, where she was held until early September. "She was not injected with anything there - they just did tests and observed her," Forum 18 was told. Prosecutors then lodged a criminal case against her, though she was not arrested in the run-up to her trial, which began on 16 November.

Sources expressed concern that the sentence, handed down by Ashgabad city court, exceeded the five year maximum penalty under Article 214 section 2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes illegal border crossing "committed with preliminary planning and in a group, or using violence or threats". The sources say that Annaniyazova had originally planned to cross with another Hare Krishna devotee, but she changed her mind before they reached the border with Uzbekistan. They say Annaniyazova's lawyer tried to call witnesses who could testify to this, but the court refused to allow this. Had she been tried under Article 214 section 1, which punishes people who cross the border illegally on their own, she would have faced a maximum two year term.

Annaniyazova's friends are now concerned about how she will fare in prison, as she is a vegetarian and no provision is made in prison for vegetarians. They say those punished under Article 214 are also not eligible for amnesty (each year President Saparmurat Niyazov declares a large-scale amnesty during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan). However, her friends say that even were she eligible for amnesty she would not be prepared to swear the oath of loyalty to the president on a copy of the Koran required before prisoners are amnestied.

The oath of loyalty is considered by many religious believers to be blasphemous and reads: "Turkmenistan, you are always with me in my thoughts and in my heart. For the slightest evil against you let my hand be cut off. For the slightest slander about you let my tongue be cut off. At the moment of my betrayal of my motherland, of her sacred banner, of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi [Father of the Turkmens] the Great [i.e. President Saparmurat Niyazov], let my breath stop."

The religious prisoner of conscience with the longest jail sentence in the former Soviet Union is in Turkmenistan. The former chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment at a closed trial in Ashgabad in March 2004. The Turkmen government has refused repeated international requests to make the verdict public (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

For more background, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=672

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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