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TURKMENISTAN: Jailed Krishna devotee sent to labour camp

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Shortly after her failed appeal against her seven year jail sentence for illegally crossing the border - charges her supporters reject - Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova was transferred from the women's prison in the capital Ashgabad to the women's labour camp in Dashoguz in northern Turkmenistan, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Work in the labour camp is reported to be hard, while bribery to escape the worst work is rampant. Even acquiring a decent place to sleep requires bribes. Annaniyazova's state of health and situation in the labour camp remains unknown. Meanwhile, the Russian Orthodox church in Dashoguz, the only Orthodox place of worship in northern Turkmenistan, still cannot complete construction of a new church begun some years ago. Officials are questioning the parish's right to use the land, while the church's registration application has been denied.

Jailed Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova was finally transferred from the women's prison in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] to the women's labour camp in Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] on 23 January, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The transfer – which had long been expected - occurred within days of her failed bid to have her seven-year prison sentence overturned at an appeal hearing at the Ashgabad city court in mid-January. Her state of health and conditions in the labour camp remain unknown.

The labour camp in Dashoguz in northern Turkmenistan close to the border with Uzbekistan is the only one for women in the country. Its address is:

Dashoguz, ulica Ilyalinskaya, Zhenskaya Koloniya DZ-K/8, Turkmenistan.

The exile Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation reported last December that the camp has six barracks housing prisoners (though many have to sleep in the open air), as well as a work area with a brick factory, sewing and wool workshops and a bakery. It noted that bribery is rampant as a way for prisoners to escape the harshest work. "Those that don't pay have to carry out the heaviest work in the industrial zone," the group reported. It said the most hazardous work is cleaning wool. Even acquiring a decent place to sleep requires bribes. The group said the camp also has a closed section with about 400 high-profile prisoners, including former top officials who have fallen from favour. It remains unknown in which part of the camp Annaniyazova is housed.

Annaniyazova, who was born in 1968 and was one of the first people in Turkmenistan to become a Hare Krishna devotee, was accused under three charges, two of which related to illegally crossing the border three years ago when she went to Kazakhstan to live at the Hare Krishna temple in Almaty (see F18News 17 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=690).

The third accusation was, sources told Forum 18, not made public at the trial in November 2005 and the extra sentence imposed in the wake of the accusation was likewise not made public, though the sentence she received exceeds the maximum penalty possible under the known accusations. It is thought within Turkmenistan that the heavy sentence was imposed at the behest of the MSS (Ministry of State Security) secret police, in order to intimidate the Hare Krishna community (see F18News 5 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=699).

Despite a reluctance by the court to give out its verdict in writing as it is supposed to do (courts in Turkmenistan rarely give out written verdicts, especially in sensitive cases), Annaniyazova was able to challenge the verdict on appeal, but this was unsuccessful (see F18News 10 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=725).

After former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment in March 2004 at a closed trial in Ashgabad, the Turkmen government refused repeated international requests to make the verdict public (see F18News 8 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=271).

Meanwhile, the exile Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported in March that the Russian Orthodox Church has been unable to complete its new church under construction in Dashoguz. The group said the foundation and walls are only partly built and work has been stopped for more than a year. The group added that the parish previously had registration with the Adalat (Fairness or Justice) Ministry, but this was revoked in the wake of the 2003 new religion law and the parish has been unable to regain it. The authorities question the parish's right to use the land, but have not obstructed worship in a portakabin, the only Orthodox place of worship in northern Turkmenistan.

The second Russian Orthodox church in the town of Turkmenabad (formerly Charjou) finally gained state registration in early January, six years after it reopened for worship and applied for registration (see F18News 10 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=725). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728

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>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY