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## BELARUS: Armed police break up Hindu meditation

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

*Armed police broke up a Hindu ritual and meditation evening in a private flat in the capital Minsk on 1 June, the group's leader Natalya Solovyova told Forum 18 News Service. The raid came exactly a week after a similar meditation meeting was broken up elsewhere in the city. The Hindu community has not been fined for meeting together, but Solovyova says members were warned that "if it occurs again, we will go on their police records, and legal consequences will begin the time after that." These raids have forced the Hindu community to move from flat to flat "like nomads", she added. No national or local religious affairs officials could explain why the religious meetings were forcibly broken up.*

On 1 June four armed police officers broke up a ritual and meditation evening held at a private flat in the capital Minsk by approximately six members of the Light of Kaylasa Hindu community, the group's leader Natalya Solovyova told Forum 18 News Service on 7 June. The raid came exactly a week after a similar Hindu meditation meeting was broken up elsewhere in the city.

Solovyova told Forum 18 that at around 6pm on 1 June, a local police officer arrived at the flat where the Hindus were meeting. He told the group they had no right to gather and escorted three of those present to the local police station, where he took their passport details. Thereafter believing the disruption to be over, said Solovyova, the group carried on worship, but were disturbed several hours later by the arrival of four police officers with machine guns. According to Solovyova, the four issued various threats, including imprisonment, described the Hindus as "sectarians" and commented that "if we were Orthodox Christians, they would have no issue with us".

Solovyova also reported that during the raid on the meditation session in a private flat in another part of Minsk on 25 May, one uniformed and one plain clothes police officer arrived at the flat at around 7pm. She said the pair behaved aggressively towards the approximately five worshippers present, warning that the owners of the flat would encounter problems as a result of the meeting and claiming that the group had "no right to gather at all, at any time".

So far on these occasions, said Solovyova, the Minsk Hindu community has not been fined, but she added that they had been warned that "if it occurs again, we will go on their police records, and legal consequences will begin the time after that." At no stage did the police officers refer to any part of the law, she said.

Solovyova explained that these raids had forced the Hindu community to move from flat to flat "like nomads". They can no longer meet at premises in a semi-rural area outside Minsk which they had used as a temple, she said, since a meeting there was broken up by police last autumn.

The group tried to register unsuccessfully before the new more restrictive religion law came into force last November. "Since then the pressure has increased," Solovyova added. She reported that the previous leaders of the community, Sergei and Tatyana Akadanova, who were given ten-day sentences last September for holding an unauthorised demonstration to protest against earlier state actions against the community, are currently in the United States seeking political asylum.

Forum 18 tried to find out why these Hindu meetings have been raided by police, but on 9 June the telephone of Alla Ryabitseva, the head of Minsk City Council's Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, went unanswered. Contacted by Forum 18 the same day, Aleksandr Kalinov at the Belarusian State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs said that his department had no documents on the Minsk Hindu community. While there was a registered Society for Krishna Consciousness, he said, "we only work with registered organisations."

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