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TURKMENISTAN: Hare Krishna prisoner of conscience freed with restrictions

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova – who has served one year of a seven year jail term – has been allowed to return to her home as part of the annual prisoner amnesty, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. She was jailed on three charges, two of which related to leaving Turkmenistan illegally. The third charge has never been made public, and sources within Turkmenistan think she was jailed for her religious beliefs. Others who did the same thing as her have not been punished, she has stated. Cheper Annaniyazova, who has the religious name Caitanya Rupini, has to report daily to the police, and it appears unlikely that she will be allowed to travel abroad for at least four years. These are the usual restrictions applied to amnestied prisoners. No recent news is known of former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment in March 2004.

Hare Krishna devotee Cheper Annaniyazova was freed from the women's labour camp in Dashoguz [Dashhowuz] in northern Turkmenistan on the morning of 19 October, as part of the country's annual prisoner amnesty, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. She has now returned to her family in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat]. "Of course we're all very pleased to have her home," sources close to her case told Forum 18 News Service on 21 October.

Sources told Forum 18 that Annaniyazova has to report daily to the local police in Ashgabad and is unlikely to be allowed to travel abroad again for at least four more years. These restrictions are the usual restrictions applied to former prisoners. "But this is less important – the main thing is that she is now back at home," sources told Forum 18.

Her release came as part of the amnesty declared by President Saparmurat Niyazov at the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Official sources say that 10,056 prisoners were due to be freed, including "almost all" female prisoners. Hare Krishna sources say that Annaniyazova was not required - as is usual for prisoners freed under an amnesty - to swear the oath of loyalty on a copy of the Koran. This was because she was one of the last of many women freed from her labour camp, and there was not time to administer the oath to all of them.

The oath of loyalty reads in translation: "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."

Annaniyazova, who was born in 1968, was one of the first people in Turkmenistan to become a Hare Krishna devotee. In 2002 she sought an exit visa to be allowed to leave to travel to Kazakhstan to live at the Hare Krishna temple in Almaty, but was refused. However, she went anyway. It was after her return to Turkmenistan in May 2005 that she was arrested for illegally crossing the border, although exit visas had by then formally been abolished. However, the exit blacklist was not and has not been abolished (see F18News 31 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=790).

Cheper Annaniyazova (who has the religious name Caitanya Rupini) had served a year of a seven-year sentence imposed 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 charge was not made public 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). Many others who did what Annaniyazova did were not charged, she stated (see F18News 17 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=690).

No recent news has been heard of former chief mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment in March 2004 at a closed trial in Ashgabad. 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).

The Hare Krishna community is one of the registered religious communities within Turkmenistan. However, many within religious communities doubt whether registration makes any real improvement to their situation in practice (see F18News 24 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=787). Unregistered religious activity remains - against international human rights standards – illegal. (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 survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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