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UZBEKISTAN: University attacks Hare Krishna followers, along with secret police

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Claiming without evidence that Hare Krishna followers were terrorists, had tried to stage a putsch in Russia and are now trying to stage a coup d'etat in Uzbekistan, Razumbai Ischanov, dean of Urgench University's Natural Sciences Faculty, has reportedly said he will expel all students who are Hare Krishna followers. Since the speech by the Dean, which had the support of University authorities, rumours have been spread that female Hare Krishna students are prostitutes, causing several planned weddings to be cancelled, and a lecturer in the natural sciences faculty forced a student Krishna devotee, against their religion, to eat meat and drink vodka. The NSS secret police have also started monitoring Hare Krishna students since the speech.

Lecturers at Urgench (Urganch) state university are "deliberately persecuting" students who are Krishna devotees, demanding that they renounce their faith, Razumboi Khasanov, a devotee in the north-western city of Urgench, told Forum 18 News Service in the city on 1 March. He said the campaign began last year with a speech by the dean of the natural sciences faculty Razumbai Ischanov attacking Hare Krishna devotees. While admitting that he had spoken out against Krishna devotees who were students of his university, Ischanov categorically denied to Forum 18 on 2 March that he had said he would expel all student Krishna devotees, even getting a copy of the Koran out of his office safe and swearing on it that he had never threatened devotees with expulsion.

In his November 2003 speech to a general meeting of students and lecturers of Urgench university, Ischanov alleged that Krishna devotees had already tried to mount a coup d'etat in Russia and that they were now trying to do the same in Uzbekistan. He also claimed that Krishna devotees studied the Kama Sutra so that they could have sex 365 days a year. Ischanov said that he would expel all students who were Krishna devotees. His speech received the full support of the university authorities.

Since Ischanov's speech, many female student devotees started to experience problems in their private lives. Rumours soon spread through the university that female Krishna devotees were prostitutes and, given the conservative nature of Uzbek society, several of their fiancés ended their engagements. Khasanov complained that Ischanov's speech was interpreted as a signal to start "persecuting" Krishna devotees. One lecturer at the natural sciences faculty made a student Krishna devotee eat meat and drink vodka, knowing that followers of Hare Krishna do not touch meat or alcohol.

Khasanov told Forum 18 that after Ischanov's speech he telephoned the National Security Service (NSS, the former KGB) and suggested that they come to his home and look at his literature. He explained to the NSS officers that he translated Indian religious literature from Russian into Uzbek. "The people who are being called Krishna devotees at university are in fact nothing of the kind - they are simply people who study Indian philosophy," he maintained. "I also explained to the NSS that I give out books on Indian philosophy to students and that there is nothing illegal in this. The security officers did not take any punitive measures against me, but since that time my apartment has been under surveillance."

Loila Babajanova, a female devotee and fourth-year student at the natural science faculty, outlined the problems she had experienced. "Basically, we feel like lepers in the university," she told Forum 18 on 1 March in Urgench. "Our room in the student lodgings is called the 'Krishna room', and the security guard refuses to let any visitors see us, saying he has been ordered to do this by the dean's office." She said devotees cannot carry Hare Krishna literature around in the university because they are immediately accused of preaching their faith (under Uzbek law activity aimed at converting believers from one faith to another are illegal). "We are being shadowed and the dean of the faculty knows precisely when we visit Khasanov. We do not know exactly who is shadowing us, whether it is university staff or the NSS."

Ischanov admitted the truth of most of Khasanov's complaints and did not deny that he had called Krishna devotees terrorists. "That Krishna followers tried to mount a coup d'etat in Russia is a well-known fact and I find it odd that you have not heard about it," Ischanov told Forum 18 on 2 March. He also said that he found out that Krishna devotees allegedly read the Kama Sutra from his own "anonymous sources".

While denying categorically he had threatened to expel Krishna devotees, Ischanov maintained his determination to keep the Hare Krishna faith out of the university. "Religion is separate from the state in Uzbekistan, but things haven't reached the stage where

Krishna devotees openly finger their beads at lectures," he told Forum 18. "They can preach whatever they like in their own homes, but I will not allow Krishna propaganda within the walls of an educational institution!"

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

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

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