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SLOVENIA: No response to Buddhist or Hindu registration applications

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Fifteen months after the Hindus lodged a registration application with the Office for Religious Communities and five months after the Buddhists lodged theirs, neither community has had any official response from the Office. "The law says an answer has to be given within two months," the abbot of the community, Gelong Shenphen, told Forum 18 News Service. Both the Hindus and the Buddhists blame Office director Drago Cepar for the impasse. He has not registered any religious communities since he took office three years ago. Cepar has been unavailable by telephone since 3 June and has failed to respond to Forum 18's written questions as to why the registration applications of ten religious communities have been stalled.

Five months after lodging its registration application with the government's Office for Religious Communities, the Dharmaling association of traditional Tibetan Buddhists has received no response from the Office, which is headed by Drago Cepar. "It seems the problem is due mainly to one man, Drago Cepar," the abbot of the community, Gelong Shenphen, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Ljubljana on 31 May. "The law says an answer has to be given within two months." The Buddhists' lawyer Rok Ceferin agreed. "It is a very simple case," he told Forum 18 on 12 June. "The Office should register the Buddhists immediately in accordance with the law." Neither Cepar nor his deputy Borut Sommeregger responded to Forum 18's written questions first submitted on 3 June. After repeated telephone calls, Cepar's secretary Maria Pajk confirmed to Forum 18 on 11 June that Cepar had received the questions and was preparing a response.

Gregor Krajc, chief government spokesperson, told Forum 18 on 12 June that after a government administration reshuffle that day, the Office is one of three government agencies whose activities will be reviewed before the autumn. He said on 28 June Cepar will become only acting director until the review is completed. But Krajc pledged that the government will resolve this issue. "We intend to register all religious communities without exception," he declared categorically.

"This is not just a problem affecting the Buddhist community, but all religious communities which have wished to register since 1999," Abbot Shenphen told Forum 18. "In Slovenia, this office is not meant to 'judge' any religious community, but just to register." He believed Cepar was obstructing the registration of religious communities as he is close to the dominant Catholic Church.

Natasa Sivic, a leader of the Hindus, said her community, which has existed for eight years, lodged its first application with the Office on 21 March 2002. She said the Office's legal specialist met Hindu leaders several times, each time demanding changes to the documents, which the community carried out. "They now claim the application was lodged in September 2002," Sivic told Forum 18 News Service from Ljubljana on 12 June.

She complained that there has been no progress since then. "They always tell us we will never get an answer. We find this very offensive. They have never given us any written answers." She said she and the Hindus' lawyer Magda Vranicar had met Sommeregger at the Office in mid-May, but he told them he could not do anything as he was soon to be removed from his post.

"We'll wait to see what happens," Sivic told Forum 18. "Something has to come out of this." Like the Buddhists, she blames Cepar for the impasse. "One government official told us off the record that if a new person takes over his job then all the communities will be registered. If not, they won't."

Since Cepar became head of the Office in 2000, no new religious communities have gained legal status. The Office's website (<http://www.gov.si/uvs>) lists 31 recognised religious communities, the last of which attained this status in 1999. Sivic said she had learnt from a government official – who had the information from Sommeregger – that a total of ten religious communities have had their registration applications stalled.

Although Cepar failed to respond to Forum 18's questions, he was quoted by journalist Ranka Ivelja in the paper Dnevnik on 28 May as asserting that his Office has no legal basis to register new religious communities. "If a group of people say about themselves they are a religious community, it doesn't mean this is truly so or that I have to take it on trust. A religious community is after all a legal subject, and this means it can buy and sell real estate, have a bank account and much more." He said "clear measures" are needed to

establish when a group of people or an organisation of believers can be defined as religious community.

"The constitution doesn't tell this, the concept of religious community is not defined a constitutional concept and needs to be defined," Cepar added. He said no law – either the law on the legal status of religious communities, first adopted in 1976, or any other law - contains such a definition.

To draw attention to the denial of registration, the Hindus organised a press conference in Ljubljana on 27 May, attended also by the Buddhists, the Baha'is and Muslims. "Although we do have registration, I was there in solidarity to support the cause of the Hindus and Buddhists," Muslim leader Mufti Osman Djogic told Forum 18 from Ljubljana on 12 June.

The Dharmaling community started holding meetings last September and was formally established on 23 December. The community's legal representative, Tiberij Sezun, lodged the registration application with the Office on 14 January. "We intend to build a temple, but beforehand we need to be registered, which is obstructed by Mr Cepar," Abbot Shenphen reported. He said that if they ever have the resources to found a school, that too would be impossible without legal status.

He said he had met Slovenia's president, Janez Drnovsek, who had been sympathetic, but even he could not get an answer from the Office as to why they were not dealing with the application.

Ceferin told Forum 18 he had repeatedly tried to meet Cepar to try to find out why the application was being held up. "He didn't answer our phone calls or our letters. We have had absolutely no response." In the wake of this, Ceferin wrote a complaint to the government, which oversees the Office, at the end of May. The government has not so far responded, but if it fails to do so within the specified two months, Ceferin said the Buddhist community will have to decide whether to challenge the denial of registration in court. "I would very much like to go to court – the case deserves it." However, he insisted the decision rests with the abbot. "They're a religious community, and Buddhists don't usually go to court."

Since January the community has met for teaching each Friday, with a meeting for practice each Saturday. Abbot Shenphen estimates that up to 120 people attend the teaching meetings, with about 50 attend the practice. The community meets in a gymnasium within the Rehabilitation Institute for handicapped people.

The abbot, Lama Thubten Shenphen, was ordained by the Dalai-Lama. The secretary is the monk David-Lodreu. Although both are foreign citizens, the rest of the community is made up of local people.

Another Buddhist group, the Union of Buddhists, was registered in 1995, but Abbot Shenphen maintains that it is no longer active and the founder now lives in Austria.

Sivic reported that her community has some 200 people associated with it, although as it has chosen not to become organised until it gains registration it cannot be sure of exact numbers. "We gather only on major feasts, such as Diwali," she told Forum 18. "If we gather for other meetings we could have problems with the police."

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