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SLOVENIA: Pressure mounts on beleaguered senior religious official

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Pressure is mounting on Drago Cepar, Office for Religious Communities director, not to block registration applications. Ten communities are known to have applied since Cepar became director three years ago but their applications languish unanswered. Government secretary Mirko Bandelj wrote to Cepar on 12 June instructing him to "handle promptly" the registration of the Dharmaling Buddhist group. The ombudsman has also urged him to register the Buddhists and the Stoic Pantheists, who have also complained of denial of registration. "The problem in our opinion is with the religious affairs office, which does not respond to the applications," Barbara Samaluk of the ombudsman's office told Forum 18 News Service. "I really wonder how such discrimination can still take place in a country which will enter Europe next year!" Abbot Gelong Shenphen of the Dharmaling community told Forum 18.

Drago Cepar, director of the government's Office for Religious Communities - who has failed to register any new religious groups in the three years he has held the post - is facing mounting pressure not to block further the registration of religious communities. Mirko Bandelj, general secretary of the government, wrote to Cepar on 12 June instructing him to "handle promptly" the registration of the Dharmaling Tibetan Buddhist group, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The ombudsman's office has taken up the case of the Buddhists as well as of the Stoic Pantheists, two of the ten religious communities whose registration applications have languished unanswered (see F18News 12 June 2003). "The problem in our opinion is with the religious affairs office, which does not respond to the applications," Barbara Samaluk, spokesperson for the ombudsman's office, told Forum 18 from the capital Ljubljana on 13 June.

In his letter to Cepar, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy, Bandelj noted that Rok Ceferin, lawyer for the Dharmaling community, had complained to the government on 2 June about the Office's failure to respond to the registration application, lodged on 14 January. "The reasons with which you have explained your silence in this concrete case to the ombudsman (Ljubljana, 27 May 2003) are not based on the derogated realisation of the constitutionally-guaranteed equality of religious communities and of the basic human right of freedom of religious belief in the Republic of Slovenia," Bandelj wrote. "I request you at the same time to inform me about the course of the procedure, especially about any eventual difficulties and their solution."

Samaluk said the ombudsman's office equally regarded Cepar's response on the Buddhist denial of registration as "unsatisfactory". "We will take further steps," she declared. She said deputy ombudsman Jernej Rovsek is completing a letter to Cepar urging him to register the Buddhists and the Stoic Pantheists. The Hindu community, which applied for registration last year, is among other communities which have seen their applications ignored.

In a 13 June written response to Forum 18's question as to why the applications were languishing unanswered, Cepar merely outlined what he claimed was the country's adherence to religious freedom standards and explained that religious communities can if they wish gain legal status as associations. "Each group, also a group which thinks of itself as being a religious community, can attain the status of legal subject according to the Law on Associations, which doesn't exclude religious activities from registration," he declared. "This enables it to immediately start the religious mission; it can for example found schools, own property and conduct legal business with it, employ people, build objects."

However, Cepar pointedly failed to explain why his Office was failing to register religious communities under the specific provisions his Office is supposed to be overseeing. "Some groups wish to get the status of legal subjects on the foundation of the Law about the legal status of religious communities. To none of these groups has the state denied this, or admitted this," he claimed. He maintained that the matter is "complicated", claiming that the state has not set out criteria "to determine when a group is a religious community". He said the government is working "intensively" to fill this "legal void".

"How it is possible to talk about a 'legal void' when 31 religious communities have already been registered?" the abbot of the Dharmaling community, Gelong Shenphen, told Forum 18 from Ljubljana on 15 June. "How it is possible to say that an association and a religious community have the same rights, when it is obviously not true!" He says it is "a fact" that the Office does not want to share the state funds that currently go to some religious communities with others. "I really wonder how such discrimination can still take place in a country which will enter Europe next year!"

While the Buddhist Dharmaling community, the Hindus and others have seen their registration applications stalled, other groups were able to register with the Office before Cepar became director, including the Rosicrucians, Moonies, Mormons and Scientologists. One of the last groups to gain such registration was the White Gnostic Church in 1999.

Cepar's secretary Maria Pajk confirmed to Forum 18 on 18 June that her boss will become acting director on 28 June while the Office's activity is reviewed. She said she was unable to say what response Cepar would give to the government secretary's letter. Cepar himself was out of the office, she said.

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