

KRISHNA LEADER AMONG FIVE SECT MEMBERS INDICTED

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WHEELING, W.VA. WHEELING, W.Va. (AP) _ The leader of a Hare Krishna community and a devotee serving a life sentence for murder have been indicted on charges they burned down a building to collect \$40,000 in insurance.

Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, head of the 700-member community at New Vrindaban, and Thomas Drescher, convicted last year of killing a sect member, were charged along with three other devotees in three federal grand jury indictments handed up Wednesday, said U.S. Attorney William Kolibash.

The charges against Drescher and Bhaktipada, referred to in the indictment by his former name, Keith Hamm, include one count each of conspiracy to commit mail fraud and arson, illegal use of fire or explosives, and malicious destruction, Kolibash said.

"It's the first time I've heard anything about arson," said Bhaktipada's attorney, Jim Lees. Lees said Bhaktipada is out of the country.

Devamrita Swami, president of New Vrindaban, said today the charges were part of an ongoing harassment of the Krishna community.

"I can say we've been waiting for the curtain to go up on this Broadway show for a long time," Devamrita said. "We are not at all amazed, although I must say the script is fresh and creative."

The New Vrindaban president said authorities have failed to investigate about a dozen house fires set by vandals at the community during the past 15 years.

"They haven't done anything even though we've presented evidence that some of our hostile neighbors have been seen leaving the scene," Devamrita said.

Kolibash said Drescher burned an apartment building in Marshall County on July 14, 1983, and Inland Insurance Co. paid the Krishna community \$40,000 five months later.

Five other counts charge Drescher and Bhaktipada with mail fraud.

Each mail fraud count carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. The other counts each carry maximum penalties of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Drescher, of Ravenna, Ohio, is serving a life sentence at the West Virginia Penitentiary for the 1983 murder of Charles Saint-Denis. Saint-Denis' body was not found before Drescher's trial, but an unidentified body was recovered from the Krishna's community farm in Marshall County shortly afterward.

The other indictments were issued against three other Krishna members and involve firearms charges.

West Virginia's Hare Krishna Community, one of the largest in the nation, has been the subject of controversy since it was created in the 1960s. Investigators have been looking into allegations including child abuse and copyright violations at the 4,000-acre community.

The Krishnas have denied any wrongdoing, and have accused authorities of harassment.

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