

Ex-Hare Krishna Leader Gets 20-Year Sentence

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A former Hare Krishna leader accused of using murder and beatings to discipline his followers was sentenced to 20 years in prison today for racketeering.

The former leader, Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, got the maximum possible term. Judge Robert Merhige Jr. of Federal District Court also fined Mr. Bhaktipada \$250,000.

Mr. Bhaktipada, 59, who uses a cane and suffers from asthma, hypertension and the effects of childhood polio, could have his sentence modified after medical evaluations.

He smiled throughout the hearing and, at one point, turned around to acknowledge eight followers sitting behind him.

"This body is not mine," he said later. "The body belongs to God, and He can do with it as He pleases."

Mr. Bhaktipada pleaded guilty to one count of racketeering, which accused him of amassing millions through fund-raising scams and conspiring to murder two dissidents to protect his business empire.

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Despite his plea, Mr. Bhaktipada has denied involvement in the deaths, admitting only to mail fraud.

Mr. Bhaktipada, born Keith Ham in Peekskill, N.Y., said he decided to enter the guilty plea at his second trial to end the longstanding Federal case.

Prosecutors said Mr. Bhaktipada ordered the killings of Charles St. Denis in 1983 and Stephen Bryant in 1986 after the two men threatened to topple him from power with rumors that he was a homosexual and a child molester.

Thomas Drescher, a former follower, was convicted of both murders and is serving a life sentence. Mr. Drescher testified that the killings were carried out with Mr. Bhaktipada's approval.

Mr. Bhaktipada was eventually accused in an 11-count Federal indictment of amassing more than \$10 million through a variety of scams, including the sale of caps and bumper stickers bearing copyrighted and trademarked logos.

Mr. Bhaktipada has been living in an abandoned rock quarry about 25 miles from the New Vrindaban community he started in 1968 and built into a thriving community with 700 followers in the mid-1980's. At its peak, the community, about 60 miles southwest of Pittsburgh, was the largest Krishna community in the United States.

The group was expelled from the International Society of Hare Krishna Consciousness in 1987.

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