New Vrindaban Legal Update
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Wide publicity has been given to investigations of Swami Kirtananda Bhaktipad and his New Vrindaban ISKCON offshoot in West Virginia. As some readers have requested an accurate description of the situation, Hinduism Today contacted Gadadhar das, Director of Public Affairs at New Vrindaban, William Kolibash, U.S. Attorney in West Virginia and Tom White, Moundsville County Prosecutor.

Swami Bhaktipad was charged with mail fraud and found not guilty by a jury. According to both Kolibash and White, no other charges are pending against the swami.

Several people with varying degrees of connection to New Vrindaban have been charged or convicted of crimes. According to Moundsville County Prosecutor White, they are: 1) Thomas Dresher, convicted of the murder of a devotee, Charles St. Denis, and of arson, now serving a life sentence in West Virginia. He is also charged with the murder of renegade ISKCON devotee, Steve Bryant in California; 2) Frederick DeFrancisco (19), who lived at New Vrindaban, was convicted of child sexual molestation, served a short sentence and is now on probation. Gadadhar pointed out DeFrancisco was only 13 when the incident occurred; 3) Gary Gardner, former head master of the New Vrindaban children's school has been charged with child molestation. He has fled the area; 4) George Meyers, convicted of transporting marijuana, is now in jail. ISKCON's says he had little to do with the community. White disputes that.

There is a current allegation involving copyright infringement by the community, however, the U.S. attorney would not comment. ISKCON said, "We have done nothing illegal."

Several weeks ago, a burned body with a bullet hole in the head and believed to

be Todd Schenker was found at the private home of a New Vrindaban devotee. Though probably a suicide, the county sheriff is investigating. White says Schenker was head of security at New Vrindaban for at least ten years.

New Vrindaban maintains these cases are among fringe devotees. To date, no one has proven any criminal action or intent on the part of the community or its leader.