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JANUARY 23, 2013 MILWAUKEE, WI

Milwaukee religious leader sentenced to 37 months in prison for visa fraud

MILWAUKEE, Wis. – A religious leader from India, who founded a local Hindu temple, was sentenced Tuesday to more than three years in prison in connection with a religious visa fraud scheme that operated in India and Wisconsin.

This sentence resulted from an investigation conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI).

Sagarsen Haldar, aka Gopal Hari Das, 33, was sentenced Jan. 22 in the Eastern District of Wisconsin to 37 months in federal prison for conspiring to commit immigration fraud. He was found guilty by a federal jury Nov. 10, 2011 of fraudulently obtaining religious worker visas – known as "R-1" visas – for Indian nationals in exchange for substantial cash payments. After he completes his prison sentence, Haldar will be turned over to ICE and placed into removal proceedings.

Haldar identifies himself as the founder, president, CEO and spiritual leader of Gaudiya Vaisnava Society (GVS), a religious temple located at 2425 W. Ramsey Ave. in Milwaukee.

According to evidence at trial, Haldar conspired to sponsor more than two dozen Indian nationals to enter the country under R-1 visas. Typically, the R-1 applications falsely stated that the individuals were religious workers from India who planned to be priests and perform religious work at the GVS temple in Milwaukee. In fact, the Indian nationals had no religious training or experience, and they had no intention of being priests or performing religious work once they arrived in the United States.

Haldar was charged in June 2010 after HSI special agents arrested him at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago as he arrived in the United States from India. A search of Haldar's luggage revealed that he was transporting identification documents – including passports and other Indian identification documents – bearing the names and photographs of other Indian nationals. His arrest was the culmination of a lengthy HSI investigation into Haldar and GVS.

The investigation into Haldar was initiated in June 2008 after HSI received information from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service's (USCIS) Benefit Fraud Unit that GVS had filed numerous petitions for R-1 religious workers from India. Subsequent investigation by HSI revealed that Haldar used the GVS temple as a front for an elaborate religious visa fraud scheme.

In the scheme, Haldar charged Indian nationals as much as \$30,000 each in exchange for his assistance to fraudulently obtain R-1 visas. The fraudulent priests typically made substantial cash payments to Haldar and his associates in India, and were indebted to Haldar for the balance once they arrived in the United States. They worked at convenience stores and other Milwaukee-area locations, drove taxi cabs, and paid Haldar from what they earned.

"This country's immigration system is not for sale, and those who think they can exploit the system for personal gain will pay the price for their crimes," said Gary Hartwig, special agent in charge for HSI Chicago. "Visa fraud not only undermines the integrity of our legal immigration process, it also poses a significant security vulnerability."

HSI was assisted in the investigation by USCIS and the U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service. First Assistant U.S. Attorney Gregory J. Haanstad, Eastern District of Wisconsin, successfully prosecuted the case.

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