

Feds outline background in Rajneesh cases

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The most detailed explanation of the federal charges against Ma Anand Sheela and Ma Anand Puja since their arrest in West Germany last October was given by two U.S. attorneys in U.S. District Court on Tuesday.

The two women appeared to enter pleas and be sentenced on federal charges that included wiretapping, violation of immigration laws and tampering with consumer products. The latter charge involved the introduction of salmonella bacteria on food at several restaurants in The Dalles in September of 1984. The federal authorities claim was part of a plan to disrupt the election in November of that year.

The most extensive explanation was in the salmonella poisoning, which made 750 people in The Dalles ill.

U.S. Attorney Baron Sheldahl cited the background on conflicts involving the Rajneesh and several elected officials, whom the Rajneesh wished to defeat in the election that year. The poisoning plot was seen as a way to "make people too sick to go to the polls" and coupled with an influx of street people who would register to vote, could influence the election.

He said the Rajneesh Medical Corporation had purchased a vial of

salmonella culture from V.W.R. Scientific in Seattle. There was no further identification of that firm in the testimony made by Sheldahl. Some of that culture was found and seized in October of 1985 after the criminal allegations came to light following the breakup of the commune. He said those sample were identical to ones of salmonella cultures taken from the restaurants affected by the poisonings.

Many details of the plot came from a deposition from former Rajneesh Mayor Krishna Deva (now known as David Berry Knapp). He

Salmonella germs purchased from Seattle firm

was a participant in some of the planning meetings and went to restaurants in The Dalles himself on one occasion and put some of the culture on food, but "no one got sick that time," Sheldahl said.

Sheldahl said the culture was put in food at salad bars and in coffee creamers. On at least one occasion, food in a grocery store was con-

taminated with some of the culture, but again, no one got ill.

Another member of the commune, Ma Anand Avelos, made a trip to The Dalles to poison food in at least three restaurants. She wore blue clothing and a wig to avoid detection.

Bonnie Barlow was identified as another participant in the scheme. She agreed to poison some of the restaurant food, but later changed her mind and threw the poison and syringe away.

Sheldahl said Knapp and Barlow both heard Sheela and Puja brag about the success of the operation on "making all those people sick."

Sheela told the court her participation in the immigration fraud involved assisting Sanyassins in obtaining visas by advising them to lie to immigration authorities and helped them prepare for their interviews. Those activities began as early as 1980. Her co-conspirators in this activity were not mentioned by name. Puja was not accused in the immigration violations.

The wiretapping count involved the installation of listening and recording devices in what was described as "the old Xerox room" in the Socrates complex at Rajneeshpuram. Those devices enabled the monitoring of conversations at six pay phones and other phones. Sheela was accused of

directing that operation and Puja was a participant in it.

The maximum penalty for the immigration charge would have been five years in prison and \$250,000 in fines. The wiretapping charge could have brought a five-year prison term and \$250,000 in fines and the tampering with a consumer product could have brought 10 years in prison and a \$25,000 fine. Judge Edward Leavy did not impose any fines.

Sheela will be forced to leave the country once her prison sentence is complete and she will be barred from returning to the U.S. without the specific permission of the U.S. Attorney General. Puja is a U.S. citizen and can't be forced to leave the country. However, her sentence included language encouraging her to leave.

She drew a prison sentence on the food poisoning charge, but got three years probation on the wiretapping charge. That will begin at the completion of her prison sentence, and Leavy ruled that if she stays in the U.S. the probationary period will be "supervised"; if she chooses to leave it will be "unsupervised."

Other charges against the two were dismissed. There had been more than one count of wiretapping and Sheela was accused of multiple counts of violation of immigration laws.