

Jehovah's Witnesses in

Ukraine

Donetsk and Luhansk Regions

Religious Freedom Concerns

Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2015

21 September 2015 – 2 October 2015

Jehovah's Witnesses suffer persecution and torture in certain territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions in eastern Ukraine. Independent groups of armed men carry out most of this mistreatment.

Harassment and Physical Assaults

- (1) **Town of Horlivka.** On 10 January 2015, armed men stopped five ministers of Jehovah's Witnesses and then took them to the local "commandant." The armed men searched, interrogated, and beat the Witnesses and accused them of homosexuality, selling children, and desecrating "Orthodox soil." During the five hours of abduction, all of the Witnesses were beaten on their arms and legs and later each of them was subjected to simulated shootings. The objective was to force the detainees to renounce their faith and to sing the Russian Federation anthem. The next day the Witnesses were released, but were forbidden to carry out their religious activities.
- (2) **City of Donetsk.** On 22 January 2015, soldiers from the Oplot Battalion kidnapped a 51-year-old minister of Jehovah's Witnesses from his place of work. His hands were tied and his eyes blindfolded, and he was thrown into the trunk of a car and driven to military headquarters. During the next nine days, he was repeatedly interrogated and accused of subversive activities.
- (3) **Village of Markyne.** On 17 May 2015, armed men detained four of Jehovah's Witnesses while they were engaged in their religious activities. They were blindfolded and taken at gunpoint to the "local headquarters," where they were interrogated and severely beaten, as seen in the photographs. They were also subjected to simulated executions. The armed men pressured them to enlist in the military and to admit that the Orthodox faith is the only true religion and that Jehovah's Witnesses are just an American sect. The abducted Witnesses were taken to the village of Bezimenne, near the front line. They were released the next day, but their money and personal belongings were expropriated.



- (4) **Town of Stakhnov.** On 21 May 2015, a commander arrested two of Jehovah’s Witnesses. They were detained at 53 Telmana Street, where the chief of intelligence, P. L. Driomov, interrogated them. One of the Witnesses was severely beaten and tortured. They were pressured to divulge personal information about fellow believers, and were accused of espionage. They were released on 2 June and, under threat of execution, were warned to discontinue their religious activities.

Seizure of Houses of Worship

In 2014 and early 2015, armed men seized 17 Kingdom Halls (houses of worship) belonging to Jehovah’s Witnesses. At present, 12 of the buildings remain in the possession of armed groups.

- (1) **City of Donetsk.** On 1 February 2015, three armed men entered the Kingdom Hall at 34 Moskovska Street. The man in charge demanded that the premises be handed over, stating that Jehovah’s Witnesses are a “sect” and that “they should not be on this earth.”



34 Moskovska Street, Donetsk

- (2) **Town of Yenakieve.** On 3 March 2015, three armed men ordered that “the owner” give them the door keys of the Kingdom Hall at 27 Bronenostsia Potomkina Street, so that the building could be turned into a barracks. Three days later the military took control of the building.



16A Donbasivska Street, Brianka

- (3) **Town of Brianka.** On 26 March 2015, armed men removed the furniture from the Kingdom Hall at 16A Donbasivska Street. They then hung their insignia on the wall, with a caption written in Russian, “The Almighty Don Host.”

Human Rights Report Reveals Bias Against Witnesses

On 8 September 2015, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released its eleventh report on the situation of human rights in Ukraine. Under the heading of “freedom of religion or belief,” it stated: “In a statement issued on 20 May, the head of the ‘Donetsk people’s republic’ threatened to ‘brutally fight sects’ and stated it did not recognize any religions apart from Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Islam and Judaism.” The report observed: “The Jehovah’s Witnesses community appears to have been particularly targeted. Since the beginning of the conflict, the armed groups have abducted and ill-treated 26 elders and members of community.”

Positive Developments

In 2014 and early 2015, a number of Kingdom Halls belonging to Jehovah’s Witnesses were seized by armed men. In recent months, no new seizures have occurred, and two seized Kingdom Halls have been returned to the Witnesses.

- (1) On 13 April 2015, the Kingdom Hall at 3A Viliamsa Akademika Street, in the town of Horlivka, was returned.
- (2) On 19 April 2015, the Kingdom Hall at 1 Cherniakhovskoho Street, town of Zuhres was returned.

For more information:

Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah’s Witnesses at generalcounsel@jw.org

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