

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN BULGARIA

STATEMENT by the EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 22 September to 3 October 2014

Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria enjoy a measure of freedom to worship and generally carry out their religious activities without disturbance. However, the Witnesses suffer numerous incidents of assaults and harassment motivated by religious hatred. The local authorities provide some assistance but generally fail to prosecute attackers or protect the victims. Additionally, some municipalities attempt to restrict the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses. HDIM.NGO/0345/14

## Physical assaults

01 October 2014

- **Yambol.** On **5 April 2014**, Nedko Karaivanov and Paul van der Schoor, 80 and 62 years old respectively, were talking to others about the Bible in an apartment building. A man came out of his apartment and began kicking Mr. Karaivanov. When Mr. Karaivanov fled, the man began to kick and punch Mr. van der Schoor, and then chased the two Witnesses to the building's exit. When the Witnesses reported the incident, the local police told the Witnesses that they did not have the right to evangelize and that the assailant's behaviour was a normal reaction to their activity. The victims went to the police station to make the report and another police officer replied that the assailant is a "hero for Bulgaria." The officer accepted their statements but refused to provide them a copy as they requested.
  - On **29 April 2014**, Mr. Karaivanov received a letter from the police stating that the assailant, Mr. Genadi Fedorenkov, had received a warning.
  - On **7 May 2014**, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses visited the police chief to discuss the prejudicial attitude of the police officers who responded to the incident.
- **Stara Zagora.** On **6 August 2014**, Mr. Stoyanov, a former police officer, attacked Ong-li Becker and Monka Atanasova while they were talking to others about the Bible. Mr. Stoyanov struck Ms. Becker on the back of the neck, and hit Ms. Atanasova in the face, bruising her eye and damaging her eyeglasses. When Ms. Becker and Ms. Atanasova filed reports with the police, the police said they would issue a warning to Mr. Stoyanov but have taken no action. The women are filing a complaint with the Stara Zagora Regional Prosecutor's Office.
- **Zhilentsi.** On **9 August 2014**, an elderly married couple, Alexander Antonov and Pavlina Antonova, were talking to others about the Bible. Miroslav Stankov, a 30-year-old man carrying a shot gun and wearing an ammunition belt cursed at the couple and threatened to kill them. The police arrived 10 minutes later and assured the couple that they would take care of the situation that week. Mr. and Mrs. Antonov intend to file a joint complaint to the Regional Prosecutor's Office against Mr. Stankov.

## Restrictions on religious activity

Three municipalities in Bulgaria—Karlovo, Kyustendil, and Burgas, have banned the evangelizing work of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Topolovgrad municipality requires a permit. Jehovah's Witnesses also face interference with their religious meetings and denial to build houses of worship.

- **Karlovo.** On **13 March 2014**, the Municipality of Karlovo adopted an ordinance regulating religious activity that prohibits evangelizing. Article 13 of the ordinance forbids offering or distributing religious materials and literature in any form on the streets or at homes. Article 14 restricts the distribution of religious literature to prayer houses of registered religious denominations and specialized bookstores. The first violation is punishable with a fine of 50 to 500 BGN (25 to 255 EUR) and the second violation is punishable with a fine of 200 to 2,000 BGN (102 to 1,022 EUR). The ordinance has not yet been enforced against the local Witnesses.

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- **Topolovgrad.** On **4 August 2014**, police officers stopped four of Jehovah's Witnesses—Anka Mincheva, Viktoria Mincheva, Jovita Maday, and Seeka Alexandrova—for speaking to others about the Bible. The officers asked to see the Witnesses' identification cards because someone had allegedly complained to the police. Because Ms. Alexandrova did not have her card with her, the police took all four Witnesses to the police station in order to issue an administrative violation to Ms. Alexandrova for not carrying her identification card. The police told the Witnesses that they must first obtain a permit from the municipality before engaging in their religious activity, and made the Witnesses sign a warning protocol acknowledging that understanding.
- **Kyustendil.** On 23 September 2009, Jehovah's Witnesses purchased property in order to construct a Kingdom Hall. The city architect assured the Witnesses that the zoning would be granted, and the Witnesses received the building permit on 25 November 2009. However, on 8 December 2009, the Regional Office for National Construction Control withdrew the building permit for violation of the municipality's planning and zoning ordinances for the property.
  - On 13 June 2012, the Kyustendil Administrative Court denied the request for re-zoning, and on appeal, ruled on January 29, 2013, to deny the request for a zoning change.
  - On **17 February 2014**, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that the Witnesses' appeal was not subject to consideration under the Spatial Development Act, making the Kyustendil Administrative Court's determination final.

### Slander in the media

Jehovah's Witnesses have been repeatedly slandered in the media by politicians and others, including a news report broadcast by Channel bTV.

- In May 2013, Witnesses filed a complaint with the Burgas Prosecutor's Office against Mr. Valentine Kasabov, a Burgas politician, who has slandered Jehovah's Witnesses on SKAT TV in a number of news reports.
  - On **12 May 2014**, the Burgas Regional Prosecutor's Office issued a decree refusing to initiate pre-trial criminal proceedings against Mr. Kasabov on the basis that the complaint should have been filed with the Regional Court, and concluded that Mr. Kasabov was not guilty of preaching religious hatred or hindering others from professing their faith. The decree referred to Mr. Kasabov's statements as 'investigative journalism' and an 'expression of his opinion.'
  - On **22 July 2014**, Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the decree to the Burgas District Prosecutor's Office.

*Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the government of Bulgaria to:*

- (1) Ensure that law enforcement authorities provide appropriate protection against the physical assaults on Jehovah's Witnesses, and acknowledge acts of religious hatred;*
- (2) Protect the right to manifest one's religious beliefs individually and jointly with others;*
- (3) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to build houses of worship without interference or discrimination; and*
- (4) Hold responsible those who, by means of public media, slander others and incite religious hatred.*