

ESCALATED HARASSMENT OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

ORAL STATEMENT BY

THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTRE OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN RUSSIA

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With deep concern we have to report a further escalation of harassment and violation of the fundamental human right to freedom of religion of Jehovah's Witnesses by Federal authorities in Russia.

- The Presidential Representative in the Ural Federal Area Nikolay Vinnichenko sent a letter to all the governors directing them to create obstacles for Jehovah's Witnesses. As a consequence, further directives aimed at harassing Jehovah's Witnesses are being sent to various institutions, including schools and hospitals.
- Natalia Scherbakova is one of Jehovah's Witnesses working in the coat-room of a school. The school principal asked her to voluntarily withdraw from the school. The principal had to write a 5-page long explanatory memorandum to the local FSB as to why Jehovah's Witnesses work in his school. Natalia wrote an open letter to President Medvedev.
- Pyotr Babilyulka, who was persecuted in the USSR and rehabilitated as a victim of the regime, has been criminally charged again in 2010 for sharing his religious beliefs with his neighbors.
- Aleksandr Kalistratov, chairman of the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Gorno-Altaysk (Siberia) was indicted and is awaiting the beginning of his trial scheduled for October 7. If convicted, he can be imprisoned for two years. In January 2009 Aleksandr was approached by a man who asked for some magazines published by Jehovah's Witnesses. The man then went straight to the prosecutor and complained that the magazines are 'extremist'. It was not until a year later, in January 2010, that the Altaysk Republic Supreme Court proclaimed some publications of Jehovah's Witnesses as 'extremist'. During the court hearings for Aleksandr's case in Gorno-Altaysk, the local prosecutor regularly called the Prosecutor General Office in Moscow. It is clear that the Prosecutor General's Office is directing the hearing.
- More than a thousand Jehovah's Witnesses traveled to attend their annual religious convention in Nezlobnaya (Stavropol Territory). But they could not enter the building to enjoy the convention because the local police blocked the entrances with garbage trucks. In his official explanation, policeman Khokhlov tells that one after another three garbage trucks inexplicably broke down in front of the three entrances to the convention hall. In continuing violation of the ECHR's decision in *Kuznetsov v. Russia*, the police disrupt and prevent Christian meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- Maksim and Zhanna Kalinin are two young Jehovah's Witnesses in Yoskar-Ola (Mari El). They were utterly shocked when they learned that they were under audio and video surveillance in their own apartment. The spy equipment was sanctioned by the court while investigators try hard to find signs of extremism in the activity of local Jehovah's Witnesses. In the same city, a religious meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses was rudely disrupted, and the Witnesses in attendance were detained and questioned.

This list can go on and on. Some 600 violations of human rights of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia were reported after Russian courts declared 52 religious publications of Jehovah's Witnesses to be 'extremist.' These court decisions as well as local acts of harassment initiated by the FSB, the Prosecutor General's Office, and the Presidential Administration in Moscow, are being carried out by the local FSB, police, Department for Fighting Extremism, and the Traffic Police, as well as courts and Customs offices.

We plead with the Russian Federation to keep its obligations to respect human rights to freedom of religion and not to limit this fundamental freedom by censorship, pressure on local authorities, and the harassment of Jehovah's Witness by law-enforcement institutions. We are pleased to note that some officials are not fulfilling the orders from Moscow to interfere with the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not promote, endorse, or practice extremism, and hence we strongly disagree with the decisions of the courts that label our literature as 'extremist' and have appealed these decisions in the ECHR.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with Russian representatives to discuss this serious issue.