

ORAL STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN UZBEKISTAN

European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

Presented to the OSCE HDIM, Warsaw, October 2-13, 2006

We want to express our appreciation for the opportunity to present this statement on behalf of all of Jehovah's Witnesses living in the country of Uzbekistan.

Jehovah's Witnesses first appeared in Uzbekistan in the 1950's after fleeing religious persecution in other parts of the Soviet Union. In cities like Chirchik and Fergana they found relative freedom to practice their faith. After the fall of the Soviet Union they applied for and were granted official registration in these two cities. Over the years they have made attempts to register in other areas, especially in the capital city Tashkent, where registration applications have been repeatedly filed since 1997, including 5 attempts in the last few years, but to no avail.

It should be noted that the Constitution of Uzbekistan guarantees freedom of religion for all its citizens throughout the country and does not bind this freedom to any sort of registration. Despite this lofty guarantee, in practice Jehovah's Witnesses have effectively been banned in all parts of Uzbekistan where they are not legally registered. This is in large part due to the restrictive 1998 'Law on Religious Freedom' which makes unregistered religious activity illegal and restricts freedom of expression.

Over the last 15 years since Uzbekistan became a sovereign nation, **Jehovah's Witnesses have been subjected to numerous arrests, fines, and beatings throughout the country – a total of over 1100 documented cases.** A number of these have exceeded the severity and brutality of persecution these peaceful, law-abiding Christians encountered earlier under the oppressive Soviet regime.

In addition to regular harassment from local police and the secret services around the country, the authorities have also recently been using other more subtle methods to restrict the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses. For example, in December 2005 the Fergana Department of Justice issued a warning to the Fergana congregation stating that it was in violation of the law, claiming that the congregation did not have a proper legal address.

Although it is obvious that the right to practice one's religion should not be connected to any legal formalities, in a good faith attempt to resolve this matter the Fergana congregation lawfully purchased a building in February 2006 and received all necessary permits from local safety officials. However, the local council (*Makhallya*) then refused to grant a permit for the use of this building as a legal address.

On August 24, 2006, the Fergana District Justice Department issued a formal decision to liquidate the congregation. Not until September 12th, after the congregation filed a separate request, did the Justice Department reveal any reasons for the liquidation. Jehovah's Witnesses were told that they cannot conduct their worship in a private home, nor are they allowed to share their beliefs with others.

The Fergana congregation now finds itself in a most awkward situation: it must have a legal address to exist, and yet it is denied the right to obtain such an address to retain its registration. As a result of the harsh 'Law on Freedom of Religion', this means that the congregation has been denied its freedom and is now under ban.

Whether this method of restricting religious freedom will extend to the sole remaining registered congregation in Chirchik is yet to be seen, although there are indications this may be attempted.

It is now apparent that the government of Uzbekistan also wants to deprive Jehovah's Witnesses of neighboring countries to practice their religious freedom. On September 5, 2006, a shipment of Bibles and religious literature sent by Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany to their fellow believers in Tajikistan was confiscated in Bukhara while in transit through Uzbekistan. Uzbek Customs officers informed the forwarding agent that there exists no appropriate permission from the Ministry of Culture of Uzbekistan for transit. This is surprising, since previous shipments of Bibles and religious literature passed through the country in transit unhindered.

We appeal to the Uzbekistan authorities, as well as the relevant representatives of the OSCE present here today, to take appropriate steps to correct the ongoing abuses of religious freedom that occur within Uzbekistan. It would be a real credit to the country of Uzbekistan if its 'Law on Religious Freedom' were truly used to uphold the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom for all of its citizens, and not to restrict it for some.