

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN TAJIKISTAN

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 26 September to 7 October 2011.

BACKGROUND

The Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Dushanbe was first registered in Tajikistan in 1994 and was re-registered on January 15, 1997. However, on October 11, 2007, the Ministry of Culture banned the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan. Religious freedom for Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan has severely deteriorated.

RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

2007-Present	Nationwide	Ban
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On February 12, 2009, the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court ruled to reject Jehovah's Witnesses' appeal. *Thus, the banning decision is now legally in force.* Jehovah's Witnesses filed a supervisory appeal on December 30, 2009, with the Presidium of the Supreme Court. On **February 17, 2010**, the Supreme Court of Tajikistan refused to refer the discretionary application by Jehovah's Witnesses to the entire panel of the Supreme Court for supervisory review. As of this reporting period, the decision of Ministry of Culture and the Military Court remains unchanged. (*)

2009-Present	Nationwide	Denial of Registration
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On March 26, 2009, the 1994 RT Religion Law was repealed and replaced by the RT *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* (2009 RT Religion Law). Article 4(1) of that new law guarantees the right "to freely choose, disseminate and change religious or other beliefs, as well as to act in harmony with them." Article 4(9) guarantees the right "to engage in large scale preaching activities." On August 28, 2009, an international delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses met with the Ministry of Culture to discuss the future prospects of legally registering their religious activity. Representatives of the Ministry of Culture informed the delegation that, the Ministry would never register Jehovah's Witnesses under the new law on religion unless the banning decision is overturned by a higher authority. On **January 18, 2010**, in total disregard of the 2009 RT Religion Law, the Ministry of Culture refused to re-register the national organization of Jehovah's Witnesses under the new law. The religious organization has appealed this decision through the Economic Courts up to the Highest Economical Court on July 12, 2011, however, in vain.

2009	Nationwide	Defamation
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In a written statement submitted on October 9, 2009 to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Tajikistan's Deputy Minister of Culture labelled Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" group and implicitly likened them to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

ABUSES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

2009-Present	Khujand	Raid on Religious Meetings/Criminal Charges
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In Khujand on the morning of June 8, 2009, Zafar Rakhimov, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, was summoned to the office of the Sughd District Committee for National Security (CNS). At the CNS office, Rakhimov was insulted by the chief officer, who accused him and his family of

religious extremism and of inciting interdenominational conflict. The interrogation quickly deteriorated when Rakhimov refused to write a statement. Enraged at the refusal, a second officer punched Rakhimov in the head and stomach and threatened him. The other 16 Witnesses involved were also repeatedly interrogated.

On June 4, 2009, a small group of Jehovah’s Witnesses met together in a private home in Khujand (northern Tajikistan) to discuss Bible subjects. Eleven local officials forced their way into the apartment and began filming those inside. Several in the group were taken to State Committee for National Security (SCNS) headquarters where they were questioned for the next six hours. One female Witness in the group was registered as a disabled person due to a recent head injury. Nevertheless, she was threatened with beatings and confinement for 10 days if she failed to answer the CNS’s questions. She was released nine hours later when the threats and abuse began to have a noticeable effect on her health and resulted in a heart attack. (*)

Seventeen Witnesses were criminally charged after a raid of this peaceful religious meeting. After the OSCE HDIM meeting in September 2009, the Ombudsman’s office and the General Prosecutor’s office in Dushanbe got involved and all 17 criminal cases were closed. However, the 17 Jehovah’s Witnesses were summoned to the Khujand City Court on **April 21, 2010**, and were charged under Article 474 of the *Code of Administrative Violations*. They faced fines of 245 to 350 Tajikistan Somonis (\$55 to \$80 USD), which is a substantial portion of their monthly wages. On **May 6, 2010**, the administrative case was adjourned because the presiding judge granted a motion by the prosecutor to discontinue the administrative proceedings and reinstitute the criminal proceedings. Though a motion with the General Prosecutor’s Office has been filed to terminate this case, a preliminary criminal investigation and a religious expert study is still underway. (*)

The loss of religious registration has had a serious negative impact on Jehovah’s Witnesses in Tajikistan. Without registration, they face criminal prosecutions and imprisonment.

July 22, 2011	Dushanbe	Harassment/Raids of Private Homes
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On July 22, 2011, representatives of the State Committee on National Security (SCNS) and the Dushanbe Police Department raided a peaceful religious meeting of Jehovah’s Witnesses held in a private apartment. The small group was gathered to read and study the Bible. The officials screamed at the group, alleging that it was “illegal” for Jehovah’s Witnesses to meet together. The officials seized all of the Witnesses’ Bibles and Bible literature.

The owner of the apartment along with the mother and her four daughters (ages 2 to 13) were taken to the police station where they were interrogated for over 7 hours. The four young girls have required medical care to cope with recurrent nightmares and stomach aches caused by the police interrogations. The other two adults in the group were detained and interrogated by police and SCNS for more than 20 hours. One of the detained adults was Sherzod Rahimov, who is handicapped due to scoliosis of the spine and can walk only with the aid of crutches, was interrogated by 15 police officers and beaten repeatedly on the soft spots of his head and body so no bruises would be left as evidence of the beating. Mr. Rahimov suffered from severe dizziness, headaches and nausea for days following the beating. The police and SCNS demanded that he renounce his faith. When they learned that he was a citizen of Uzbekistan, they threatened to falsely accuse him for recent criminal acts in Tajikistan and to torture him by putting him in an electric chair. Mr. Rahimov was deported to Uzbekistan on August 17, 2011. (*)

On July 27, 2011, Mrs. Zebo Shoyeva (owner of the apartment) was called by Dushanbe Police Department and requested to report to them in reference to her presence at an “illegal meeting”

on July 22, 2011. Upon her arrival, without any prior notice, they took Mrs. Shoyeva directly from the Police Department to a court where she was tried without any legal representation and was fined with 350 Tajiki somonis (approximately US\$75, which is 4 times the official minimal monthly wage in Tajikistan) for illegal religious education.

2007-Present	Tajik Border	Religious Literature Labeled as “Extremist” Confiscated and Destroyed
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In April and May 2007, two shipments of Bibles and Bible study aids were confiscated by Tajikistan customs. On February 23, 2010, a judge signed an order for the destruction of both shipments of religious literature. The order states that the religious community of Jehovah’s Witnesses “is known as a ‘dangerous and totalitarian sect’ and is banned in the territory of the Republic of Tajikistan.” The decision orders that the literature be destroyed “immediately” and that the decision “cannot be appealed.” This decision was made without notice to the consignor in Germany. On **July 16, 2010**, Jehovah’s Witnesses were informed by local customs authorities that the storage house destroyed all of the literature that remained.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OBJECTIVES

Jehovah’s Witnesses call upon the government of Tajikistan to:

- (1) Re-register the national organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Tajikistan.
- (2) Discontinue unlawful and unwarranted searches for religious literature in private homes; and cease interrogating and mistreating individuals professing religion of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

(*) Press release is available at <http://www.jw-media.org/tjk/index.htm>