

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN UZBEKISTAN

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 Uzbekistan have been repeatedly denied the right to register their congregations, arrested for attending religious meetings, physically mistreated, and fined for possessing religious literature. Since the beginning of 2014, 4 Jehovah's Witnesses have been charged and convicted for "illegal" religious activity, 55 have been fined for possessing "illegal" religious literature, and 3 have been physically beaten.

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Denial of registration

Only one congregation in the entire country—located in the town of Chirchik—has registration. Jehovah's Witnesses have not been granted registration in any other region of the country. As a result, all of their literature found outside of Chirchik is labelled "banned" and meetings held outside of Chirchik are deemed unlawful.

Police raids and mistreatment

Since the start of 2014, there have been 33 police raids on meetings and private homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan.

Bukhara. On **11 January 2014** police raided a peaceful religious gathering and arrested Ms. Sanobar Bikmullina. She was taken to the police station, where she was subjected to verbal and physical abuse by officer Shukurov Konstantin. She spent six days in detention in the town of Kagan, Bukhara, before she was released. On **23 January 2014** the District Court of Kagan ordered her to pay a fine of 480,525 UKS (about 210 USD).

Other Police Raids. When police raid the homes of Witnesses outside of Chirchik, they seize any religious literature they find and send it to the CRA. The CRA consistently labels the literature "banned" and the individuals from whom it was seized are fined.

Positive developments

Tashkent. On **14 April 2014** CRA Chairman Artikbek Yusupov and Deputy Chairman Bekzod Kodirov met with representatives of the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses. They discussed the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan and the need to allow further registration of their congregations, starting in Tashkent.

On **6 August 2014** the Deputy Chairman of CRA had a follow up meeting with Jehovah's Witnesses and indicated that it might be premature to register Jehovah's Witnesses in Tashkent and in other cities because Jehovah's Witnesses continued to be arrested in parts of Uzbekistan for so-called "illegal" religious activity. He requested further meetings to continue the dialogue with the goal of eventually registering Jehovah's Witnesses in Tashkent and in other large cities of Uzbekistan.

Chirchik. With the CRA's assistance, on **14 April 2014** Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Uzbekistan were able to hold their annual sacred Memorial of Christ's death without hindrance. Local government officials and CRA representatives attended the event in Chirchik. For the last two years, this event has been conducted without incident throughout the country.

Nationwide. In early 2014 the State Committee on Religious Affairs has granted approval to import Bibles in Uzbekistan. It is the hope of Jehovah's Witnesses that they will be able to do this also in the future.

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the government of Uzbekistan to:

- (1) Register them in Tashkent and other Uzbekistan cities;*
- (2) Stop illegal searches and seizures of religious literature from their homes; and*
- (3) Stop arresting and prosecuting them for attending peaceful religious gatherings.*

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