

# JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN RUSSIA

## ORAL STATEMENT BY THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTRE OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN RUSSIA

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Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are happy to observe an increasing number of International commitments from various bodies, including the OSCE, that aim to eradicate all forms of discrimination. By means of this report we wish to demonstrate that, while Jehovah's Witnesses are still encountering problems in certain aspects of their activity in RUSSIA, there are also several positive developments in the sphere of religious freedom that are worth noting.

An investigation of the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia that has been ongoing for several years poses a serious threat to the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses. The investigation by agencies of the Prosecutor's office, instigated by members of anti-Cult Committees, is integrally linked to the 2004 decision to liquidate the legal entity of the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses and ban its activities. During 2007 the Administrative Centre has experienced multiple and repetitive investigations into the lawfulness of a wide range of activities, though these have failed to find any evidence of criminal activity. The prosecutor's office has also instructed hospital managers to provide them with confidential medical information on citizens who are either practising or interested in the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. Such actions constitute a clear violation of the Constitution of the Russian Federation and also the European Convention on Human Rights.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses are today legally registered in 70 regions, they have had to fight to protect their freedom of assembly as exemplified in a recent victory before the European Court of Human Rights in *Kuznetsov v Russia* involving police interference during a religious meeting. Similar problems are still being encountered despite this favourable judgment. However, it is noteworthy that following interference by local authorities into the conducting of the celebration of the Memorial of Christ's Death on 2 April 2007 in Tashtagol, Priamurskiy and Satka, courts handed down favourable decisions in support of the right of Jehovah's Witnesses to hold such religious services. In the case involving the disruption of the Memorial celebration in Satka, Ms. Veronika Milinchuk, the Russian Federation representative to the European Court of Human Rights, ordered the Chelyabinsk Regional Prosecutor to conduct an investigation into the actions of the police who disrupted the religious service, as a result of which the police were ordered to eliminate the violations of religious freedom and to discipline the officers involved.

Attempts were made by the authorities in some cities to disrupt district conventions of Jehovah's Witnesses scheduled for the summer of 2007 in Russia. However, we are pleased that all 56 planned conventions have been successfully held, despite the fact that instructions on how to disrupt conventions of Jehovah's Witnesses were published on the Orthodox anti-sect website of the Saint Irenaeus of Lyon Informational-Consultative Centre.

In some cities attempts to build places of worship by Jehovah's Witnesses have faced strong opposition from local authorities, incited by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In Moscow, it is no longer possible for over 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses to rent premises for religious meetings. Peaceful citizens have been detained by the Police and treated as criminals for sharing their beliefs with others. Some have lost their employment or been threatened with dismissal for practicing their religion or talking about their beliefs. In several child custody cases, reference was made to the Moscow decision as a basis for being granted custody to the non-Witness parent without taking into account the best interests of the child.

We therefore commend the Russian authorities for the steps that are being taken to eliminate intolerance and discrimination and implement European Court judgments, and look forward to seeing evidence that this process will continue. A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with Russian representatives at this meeting to discuss any of these issues.