

CAMPAIGN OF PERSECUTION AGAINST JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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

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Jehovah's Witnesses is a Russian religion which has a 120-year history in the territory of Russia. In 1996, an RF Presidential Decree officially acknowledged that Jehovah's Witnesses were "victims" of "unfounded political repression," and rehabilitated them.

Although since then the activity, literature, and beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses have not changed, they are once again faced with criminal persecution. At present in the cities of Asbest and Taganrog the prosecutor's offices are making attempts to have the beliefs, literature, and activity of Jehovah's Witnesses pronounced extremist, on the basis of which they will be able to liquidate their local religious organizations and ban their literature. As a reminder, in the former Soviet Union just a few vague punitive articles were used for political repression, by means of which Jehovah's Witnesses were accused of anti-Soviet activity and pronounced as enemies of the people. There shouldn't be any doubt as to the fact that the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses, which has been upheld on many occasions by judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, has nothing in common with extremism.

The violations of the principle of a secular State arouse deep concerns. In various regions the law enforcement agencies are in close collusion with the Russian Orthodox Church. A legal assistant from the Yekaterinburg Eparchy has prepared statements to prosecutors, and has openly published information on how to conduct criminal prosecution, how to liquidate religious associations, and how to disrupt religious services of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Of particular concern is the unfounded interference by organs of the FSB in the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses. Written applications have been made by Jehovah's Witnesses to the Presidential Administration and the head of the FSB requesting appointments to discuss this critical situation, but to date, their requests have been ignored. Moreover, the official websites of the prosecutor's office and the FSB openly refer to measures being taken against Jehovah's Witnesses. This creates a negative view of their activity and has led to the following worrying developments:

- In Yekaterinburg officers of the FSB, in connection with a criminal investigation that has been instigated, conducted a raid on a Kingdom Hall, seizing a large quantity of religious literature. Eighteen members of the congregation were searched and detained for 8 hours.
- The management of stadiums and halls throughout Russia at which Jehovah's Witnesses previously held their conventions have candidly indicated that they have been pressured by officers from the FSB to cancel contracts. As a result many such religious events were disrupted, including in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, despite the recent judgment of the ECHR in the case of *Kuznetsov v. Russia*.
- On July 11, 2008, in Chekhov, near Moscow, unidentified individuals committed an arson attack on a place of worship. Eyewitnesses reported that the fire crew, despite arriving just a few minutes after the blaze began, displayed criminal negligence by taking no action to stop the fire in its early stages, as a result of which the building was severely damaged. Despite the clear evidence of arson, the police continue to delay the investigation. This is not the first such case. In 2007 an identical attack was

carried out on a Kingdom Hall in Zvenigorod. The fact that it was arson was confirmed, but, as in Chekhov, no further investigative efforts were made to find those responsible.

- Since 1995, and in particular during the last four years, a relentless campaign has been being waged by the Saint Petersburg Prosecutor's Office to investigate the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Saint Petersburg on the grounds of citizens who are members of anti-cult movements. Not having found any violations, the prosecutor has searched for new applicants and sends other organizations to the Center to carry out inspections. Although the inspections have not established any serious violations, the prosecutor's office has not closed the investigation and continues to search for violations.

Jehovah's Witnesses are grateful to the Russian authorities for the measure of religious freedom granted to them. However, we have recently noted a marked deterioration of the situation. The facts referred to herein, along with the 50-year experience of severe persecution in the former Soviet Union give them the right to express their concerns at the planned campaign to oppress Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Russia. They have no desire to become victims once again, only to be rehabilitated yet again after several decades.

We appeal to the Russian Federation authorities to eliminate the legal uncertainty and make a clear definition of extremism to exclude the use of its present vagueness to persecute law abiding citizens such as Jehovah's Witnesses for their beliefs. We hope for real steps to be taken by the State to protect the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses and to promote tolerance within Russian society, as well as to agree to open dialogue. Our delegation is ready to meet with representatives of the Russian Federation to discuss this issue and provide copies of documents supporting the statements made herein.