

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN TAJIKISTAN

ORAL STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

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From 1994 till 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses enjoyed legal recognition in TAJIKISTAN. During that time, they had a good relationship with authorities. They even openly organized public meetings in some of the most prestigious buildings in the capital. The authorities were thus able to observe them as peaceful and law-abiding people. This was particularly obvious from their non-participation in the terrible civil war that ravaged the country. Therefore, the decision taken by the Ministry of Culture in 2007 to ban Jehovah's Witnesses was as surprising as it was shocking.

My name is Zafar Rahimov and I live in the city of Khudjand, Tajikistan. On May 15 2009, local television broadcasted a program showing exemplary Tajik families. Among the thousands of families in Khudjand, my family was selected. As you can see, I am not a criminal or someone representing a threat for the country, but only a peaceful Tajik citizen.

You may therefore wonder why only three weeks later, on June 8, I was summoned to appear the same day at the local District Committee for National Security (CNS) where I was immediately insulted by the officer in charge. My family and I were then falsely accused of religious extremism and since I refused to make a written statement, I was punched in the head and stomach and threatened with imprisonment. The reason? Only because I am one of Jehovah's Witness in Tajikistan who were banned on October 2007.

This kind of incident is sadly enough not an isolated case in Tajikistan. For instance, four days before I was beaten, in the same city, a woman was threatened to be beaten even though she is registered as a disabled person because of a recent head injury. She was released nine hours later only because the treats and abuse began to have a noticeable effect on her health. The reason? Once more, only because she is a Jehovah's Witness in Tajikistan.

Similar harassments and difficulties have occurred in other cities. These repeated incidents are raising fears that the authorities have now decided to hunt down and arrest Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country. A complaint was filed with the new appointed ombudsman of Tajikistan, in the hope that this will help to find a solution to this sad situation.

In order to encourage the dialogue with the country authorities, a 16-page brochure entitled "Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan" was prepared. This brochure is available in the Tajik, Russian and English language. A certain quantity of this brochure is at your disposal so that you can judge for yourselves.

Jehovah's Witnesses remain open for a dialogue with the Tajikistan authorities to find a solution for this situation. They remain confident, knowing that this situation will be solved as soon as Tajikistan will comply to it's own international agreements.