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United States Mission to the OSCE

On Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Russian Federation

As delivered by Acting Political Counselor Lane Darnell Bahl
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 23, 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The United States is deeply concerned by the July 13 announcement that the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Voronezh Region conducted 110 raids, as mentioned before, in a single day against Jehovah's Witnesses, resulting in criminal cases against at least 10 persons and at least two reported beatings by police. The scale of this repression against members of a peaceful religious minority group is truly shocking, as was local authorities' press release bragging about it.

Unwarranted abuse against the peaceful community of Jehovah's Witnesses has escalated since 2017, when the Russian Supreme Court labeled the faith a supposed "extremist" organization for its members' peaceful exercise of their religious freedom. The United States and many others in this hall have spoken out and will continue to speak out concerning reports of unjust police raids, arbitrary arrests and detentions, convictions resulting in up to six-year sentences, and torture of Jehovah's Witnesses by Russian authorities.

In its public statement, the Voronezh Investigative Committee claims that some of the individuals detained used such "conspiracy measures" to conceal their activities as "storing reports and other documentation in electronic form, organizing groups and using video conferencing to conduct collective meetings." I use such "conspiracy measures" on a daily basis and I would point out that anyone that members of the Russian delegation participating in this meeting remotely are—at this very moment—guilty of engaging in such activities. These justifications are both absurd and shameful.

Furthermore, Russia continues to try to use international law enforcement systems, to pursue Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other religious minority groups located abroad, as part of a larger pattern of Russian actions aimed at transnational repression. The United States calls upon participating States to reject Russia's targeting of Jehovah's Witnesses for reprisal for practicing their faith.

We also note with concern that authorities have stripped citizenship from multiple imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners of conscience. We note the case of former religious prisoner of conscience Yevgeniy Kim, who was stripped of his citizenship, rendered stateless, and is still languishing in a migration detention center over

15 months after his release from prison. His citizenship should be restored, and he should be released.

The United States renews our call on Russia to immediately release all those imprisoned or detained for exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the 10 Jehovah's Witnesses already reportedly convicted and serving prison terms, as well as the nearly 50 others reportedly held in pretrial detention or house arrest for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. We urge Russia to cease criminal investigations against Jehovah's Witnesses for practicing their faith, including the reported 353 investigations currently ongoing. We further call on Russia to halt the seizure of the Jehovah's Witnesses' headquarters property and abide by its international obligations and OSCE commitments to respect freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for all.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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