

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION ESCALATES IN UZBEKISTAN

*Statement from the European Association Of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses
Presented to the OSCE HDIM, Warsaw, October 2-13, 2006*

We want to express our appreciation for the opportunity to present this statement on behalf of all of Jehovah's Witnesses living in the country of Uzbekistan.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in Uzbekistan since the late 1950's. Although there are various congregations and groups of Jehovah's Witnesses in different regions of Uzbekistan, including Tashkent, the only two officially registered congregations were in Fergana and Chirchik. On August 25, 2006, the media reported that Jehovah's Witnesses in Fergana had been "closed" down. On July 7, 2005, the Tashkent Region Department of Justice demanded that Jehovah's Witnesses in Chirchik reregister, including a letter from the district *Khokimiat* confirming the new legal address of the organization. The reregistration documents were submitted but no reply has been received. On June 8, 2006, the Tashkent Justice Department rejected the registration application of Jehovah's Witnesses because of the absence of a letter of guarantee from the Yakkasaray District *Khokimiat*. In the capital city Tashkent, 5 attempts for registration have been repeatedly filed since 1997, but to no avail.

It should be noted that the Constitution of Uzbekistan guarantees freedom of religion for all its citizens throughout the country and does not bind this freedom to any sort of registration. Despite this lofty guarantee, in practice Jehovah's Witnesses have effectively been banned in all parts of Uzbekistan where they are not legally registered.

The authorities are using the 1998 law on religion and its amendments as a tool to obstruct the religious activities of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities. The law categorizes unregistered religious organizations as "illegal". Jehovah's Witnesses are deprived of the freedom of expression and assembly as guaranteed by the OSCE and international commitments ratified by Uzbekistan. According to officials, individuals may have religious literature only for personal use. In practice, the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Uzbek language is banned; however, the literature may be used in Russian. Consequently, Uzbek Witnesses are deprived of the right to read religious literature in their own language.

Misinformation, lack of dialogue and objective examination has generated a climate of suspicion toward Jehovah's Witnesses for being misrepresented. They are closely monitored by regular call-ups and interrogations. Freedom of peaceful assembly is guaranteed by the Constitution of Uzbekistan, and yet it has been frequently violated.

There are now over 1100 documented cases of Jehovah's Witnesses having been arrested, detained, fined, or beaten. More than 700 of those cases occurred on two days—March 24, 2005, and April 12, 2006—that marked the annual religious observance by Jehovah's Witnesses of the Memorial of Christ's death. On those dates, coordinated, nationwide police raids were directed against Jehovah's Witnesses. Baton-wielding police arrived in buses to arrest all in attendance at many locations where Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting. There were several incidents of police brutality accompanying these raids. Subsequently, many of those arrested were charged under Articles 201, 202, 240, and 241 of the Code of Administrative Violations. These arrests resulted in multiple court cases, fines, and detentions.

In addition to regular harassment from local police and the secret services around the country, the authorities have also recently been using other more subtle methods to restrict the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses. For example, in December 2005 the Fergana Department of Justice issued a warning to the Fergana congregation stating that it was in violation of the law, claiming that the congregation did not have a proper legal address.

Although it is obvious that the right to practice one's religion should not be connected to any legal formalities, in a good faith attempt to resolve this matter the Fergana congregation lawfully purchased a building in February 2006 and received all necessary permits from local safety officials. However, the local council (*Makhallya*) then refused to grant a permit for the use of this building as a legal address.

On August 24, 2006, the Fergana District Justice Department issued a formal decision to liquidate the congregation. Not until September 12th, after the congregation filed a separate request, did the Justice Department reveal any reasons for the liquidation. Jehovah's Witnesses were told that they cannot conduct their worship in a private home, nor are they allowed to share their beliefs with others.

The Fergana congregation now finds itself in a most awkward situation: it must have a legal address to exist, and yet it is denied the right to obtain such an address to retain its registration. As a result of the harsh 'Law on Freedom of Religion', this means that the congregation has been denied its freedom and is now under ban. Whether this method of restricting religious freedom will extend to the sole remaining registered congregation in Chirchik is yet to be seen, although there are indications this may be attempted.

It is now apparent that the government of Uzbekistan also wants to deprive Jehovah's Witnesses of neighboring countries to practice their religious freedom. On September 15, 2006, a shipment of Bibles and religious literature (none of it in the Uzbek language) sent by Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany to their fellow believers in Tajikistan was confiscated in Bukhara while in legal transit through the country.

This is apparently in serious violation of existing international Customs agreements to which Uzbekistan is also a party. This is surprising, since previous shipments of Bibles and religious literature passed through the country in transit unhindered.

The six million Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide and all supporters of religious freedom appeal to the Uzbek authorities to

- Register the religious communities of Jehovah's Witnesses;

- Halt police interference with peaceful worship services; and
- Dialogue with the representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses in order to eliminate misunderstandings.