

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l

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OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

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Working Session 6: Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

Russia: 170,000 Russian citizens forbidden to practice their faith

**Intervention by Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), in cooperation with the
Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe (FOREF)**

Chairman,

Our organization, along with the Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe, takes this opportunity to raise once again what is arguably the most flagrant assault on religious freedom to occur in the Euro-Atlantic region since the end of the Soviet Union and its satellite communist regimes in Eastern Europe – namely, the Russian Federation's illegal ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses.

As we meet here today, Jehovah's Witnesses, who are charged with membership in an "extremist" organization, are being prosecuted for no other crime than their religious faith.

The ban was confirmed by the Russian Supreme Court on the 20th of April 2017. The law makes it a crime for about 170,000 Russian citizens to practice their faith. The

denomination has faced increasing persecution in Russia for decades. Indeed, we have warned about the growing persecution of members of this group in Russia for 13 years.

Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen, was arrested for attending a religious meeting of Jehovah's Witness and was sentenced to a 2-month pretrial detention that has been extended until 23 November. Russia is thus incarcerating a prisoner of conscience in this case.

Still, this unprecedented restriction on the fundamental human right to freedom of religion, a right the Russian Federation is committed to protect as a signatory to the Helsinki documents, and under legal treaty obligations, has been met with only limited and muted criticism. More often than not, the ban has been met by silence indicating indifference. International reaction has not been consistent with the gravity of this massive violation of human rights.

The weak reaction to the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses reflects enduring prejudice against minority religions, and what are categorized as "sects." Indeed, it reflects the same ignorance and condescension that motivated Russian authorities, at the behest of the Russian Orthodox Church, to outlaw the group.

Our organizations applaud numerous activists, experts, international officials, and governments, and the few human rights organizations, which have voiced their objections.

But not enough have done so. The issue has not been afforded the importance it deserves, but has largely remained underreported. We can only conclude that weak international criticism and action to counter this assault on freedom of religion will be taken as a "green light" for further legal discrimination against religious communities not only in Russia, but in other states where authoritarian regimes seek to impose cultural and spiritual harmony upon their citizens.

We are thus calling on the participating States of the OSCE to raise their voices against the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses by the Russian Federation. Without exaggeration, the future of religious freedom in the region depends on it.

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Recommendations

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l (HRWF) and Forum for Religious Freedom/ Europe (FOREF) urge the authorities of the Russian Federation

- To lift the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses and to restore the full religious freedom of the 175,000 members of their movement**
- To release Dennis Christensen, a Danish Jehovah's Witness detained since April 2017 for attending a religious meeting in Oryol.**