

HARASSMENT OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN RUSSIA

ORAL STATEMENT BY

THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTRE OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN RUSSIA

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We report an escalation of attempts by the Russian authorities, particularly the Prosecutor General's Office, to harass and victimize Jehovah's Witnesses. Russia is the only country in Europe where Jehovah's Witnesses are facing such obstruction that even exceeds some of the measures used in the U.S.S.R. by ideologists of the past regime.

- Earlier this year the Prosecutor General's Office ordered mass investigations of Jehovah's Witnesses resulting in over 500 inspections. During 2009 there have been nine ongoing court cases in Russia aimed at finding the literature and activity of Jehovah's Witnesses extremist or liquidating local religious organizations (LROs). They are being coordinated by the Prosecutor General's Office and generally follow a set pattern, which includes the court ordering an expert study of the literature listed in the claim to the institution chosen by the prosecutor. On September 11, 2009, the Rostov Regional Court ruled to grant the prosecutor's claim to liquidate the Taganrog LRO and to pronounce extremist most of the literature on the list supplied by the prosecutor. This case will be appealed to the Russian Federation Supreme Court.
- Criminal cases have also been instigated in Asbest and Gorno-Altaysk for distributing extremist materials. The criminal case in Asbest against local Jehovah's Witness Igor Ananyin was closed after an expert study conducted near Asbest concluded that the literature examined did not contain signs of extremism, and Ananyin was told that he could apply for compensation and rehabilitation. However, just three weeks later, the ruling to close the case was reversed by a superior prosecutor and a repeat expert study was ordered from another institution in Bryansk, some 2,000 kilometres west of Asbest. So far, at least ten expert studies have been or are being conducted on Jehovah's Witnesses' literature in six regions. They vary from finding them guilty of extremism to exonerating them of all such charges.
- The investigations and criminal cases have been accompanied by violations of human rights. Meetings for worship were recently raided by the police and FSB in Asbest and Kamyshlov, Sverdlovsk Region, and those in attendance were detained and questioned. In Asbest, a 15-year old boy whose parents were away at the time was detained and forcibly placed into care at a children's home where he was held for over three weeks despite written requests from the boy and his attorney and a telegram from his parents requesting that he be freed. The management of the home stated they did not understand why the police pressed them into taking such measures. During questioning, Aleksandra Mastyugina, who was pregnant, was threatened by the police with being put in a detoxification cell. After being questioned for a second time she became ill, was hospitalized, and suffered a miscarriage.

The current negative climate toward Jehovah's Witnesses created by government officials has produced other troubling consequences. This summer we have encountered problems conducting our annual religious conventions in Russia. In several places, conventions had to be held in fields rented for the occasion, as the management of most stadiums in Russia now refuse to rent to Jehovah's Witnesses for fear of reprisals from the FSB and city administrations. Officials from the police, the FSB, city administrations and in some cases prosecutors' offices went to extreme lengths to prevent these religious meetings from taking place, using investigations, tractors, and threats against stadium managers who were cooperating with Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not promote, endorse, or practice extremism or publish extremist literature. Some prosecutors, the FSB, and some courts are trying hard to use this trumped up pretext to limit the religious freedom of their fellow Russian citizens professing the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses. We therefore request that the Russian authorities take steps to end the campaign of harassment orchestrated by the Prosecutor General's Office and to put a stop to the violations of individual rights taking place against Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia as a direct result of this campaign.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with Russian representatives to discuss this serious issue.