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Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l

Avenue d'Auderghem 61/16, 1040 Brussels

Phone/Fax: 32 2 3456145

Email: international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net – **Website:** <http://www.hrwf.eu>



FOREF Europe (Forum for Religious Freedom), **Office:** Seidengasse 28/4, 1070 Vienna, AUSTRIA

President: Dr. Aaron Rhodes, **Executive Director:** Peter Zoehrer

Phone: +43 6645238794, **E-mail:** foref.office@gmail.com, **Website:** foref.info, **Blog:** www.foref-europe.org

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

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Working Session 7

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief

Russia: Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

Chairman,

In the Russian Federation, peaceful and law-abiding Jehovah's Witnesses are being violently detained by security forces who physically and verbally ill-treat them as if they are terrorists based on the government's assertion that their books and teachings

“undermine confidence in Christian teachings.” They are treated as violent, dangerous criminals, as members of an “extremist” organization.

We know of 54 prosecutions under Administrative Code Article 20.29 in 2017, resulting in 49 convictions, and the confiscation and destruction of literature. We know of 23 members of the faith who are incarcerated, all based on an April 2017 Supreme Court Ruling that banned all Jehovah’s Witness groups.

Jehovah’s Witnesses are under surveillance by wiretapping and videotaping.

More than 200 Jehovah’s Witnesses have asked for asylum in Finland, fleeing police raids, criminal prosecution, and beatings.

Russia’s Presidential Council on Human Rights has questioned the legality and validity of the criminal prosecutions of Jehovah’s Witnesses, stating that ***“There is a clear contradiction between the stated position of the Government of the Russian Federation and law enforcement practice. This is a cause for concern, as criminal prosecutions and arrests have become endemic.”***

Denials by the Government of the Russian Federation in response to concerns raised by the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the European Court of Human Rights, to the effect that there is no threat to freedom of religion posed by the Supreme Court Ruling and by the follow-up practices to which we have referred, lack credulity. The Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Russian Federation are being arrested, detained and prosecuted because of their beliefs.

The legalistic denials are simply evidence of a profound contempt for international human rights law and for those institutions. And we are sorry to observe that the Russian Federation is also demonstrating its contempt for political commitments undertaken here, in the OSCE. The persecution of an entire religious community by a participating State is unique in the history of the Helsinki Process. It sets a terrifying precedent as evidence of the failure of this organization to protect human rights.

Recommendations

Like all of the main independent Russian human rights organizations, some of which were brutally persecuted by the Soviet Union but have illuminated principles that should inform civil society human rights activity,

we demand that the Russian Federation

put an end to the prosecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses;

release from custody of all charged with extremism under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code;

overturn the Supreme court ruling prohibiting the activity of Jehovah's Witness organizations.

we urge all participating States to make the same points and to back them up with bilateral policies that make clear that no democratic state that truly honors human rights can have a normal relationship with the Russian Federation as long as its persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses persists.

Thank you.