

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN TAJIKISTAN

ORAL STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 24 September to 5 October 2012

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Jehovah's Witnesses have peacefully existed in Tajikistan for decades. They received state registration in 1994. For the following 13 years, they enjoyed an excellent relationship with the authorities and could worship openly. But suddenly, on October 11, 2007, the Ministry of Culture banned their activities. The reasons given to ban Jehovah's Witnesses was because of their conscientious objection to military service and because they peacefully discuss their religious beliefs with interested persons. The ban was in flagrant disregard of Tajikistan's Constitution and international law which both guarantee these fundamental rights.

Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the decision to ban their activity. The appeal was examined, not by the civil courts as one would expect, but by the military courts which embarked on an evaluation of the correctness of the Bible-based beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the banning decision, and their appeals were systematically dismissed by the courts.

Jehovah's Witnesses took further steps to try to resolve the unconstitutional ban. Besides many efforts to find a solution through dialogue with the authorities, they tried to re-register in accordance with the 2009 *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations*. Their application for re-registration was rejected.

The effect of this situation on Tajik citizens who are Jehovah's Witnesses is that they are deprived of the right to assemble openly, to rent or own a place of worship, and to import Bibles and other religious literature. Police have used the decision to terminate the activity of their national association to justify arrests, detentions, beatings, searches, and deportations of individual Jehovah's Witnesses.

A typical example occurred on July 22, 2011, in the capital city of Dushanbe, when police officers forced their way into a private apartment where a few Jehovah's Witnesses were peacefully gathered to discuss the Bible. The police interrogated all present, including two young girls ages 11 and 13. Two adults (a man and a woman) were taken to the police station and were harshly interrogated by up to 15 police officers for more than 20 hours. One of them, a disabled young man, was severely beaten in an attempt to force him to renounce his faith. Detailed information on this and similar events can be found on the written statement that has been posted on the OSCE website.

Article 4 of Tajikistan's *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* guarantees the right "to freely choose, disseminate and change religious or other beliefs, as well as to act in harmony with them." We implore Tajikistan to now grant this freedom to its citizens who are Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the Government of Tajikistan to re-register their national organization and allow them the freedom to meet together for peaceful worship, free from fear of harassment or punishment by the authorities.

Today we had an interesting meeting with a representative of Tajikistan delegation who informed us that it would be possible to reopen the dialog with the authorities with view of solving the problems.