

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN BULGARIA

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

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

Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in Bulgaria since 1888. They were legally registered as a religious association in 1938, in 1991, and again on 6 October 1998. Today, more than 5,000 persons attend their Bible-based meetings for worship. Jehovah's Witnesses enjoy freedom of worship in Bulgaria but continue to suffer violent attacks motivated by religious hatred, while authorities fail to protect victims or prosecute attackers.

#### ***Authorities refuse to act against VMRO campaign to slander Jehovah's Witnesses***

The political party known as VMRO, which holds an influential position in Bulgaria, has campaigned extensively to slander the Denomination of Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria. It has done so by holding demonstrations outside the Witnesses' meeting halls and in other public places, and by distributing leaflets containing slanderous lies. Further, VMRO has promoted slanderous attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses in the media. Their goal is to incite hatred and animosity against Jehovah's Witnesses, turning public opinion against them. In particular, VMRO has carried on an active campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses in the cities of Ruse and Varna.

- **Ruse.** In March 2010, the local VMRO party in Ruse held a press conference in an Orthodox Church announcing their intention to distribute 10,000 leaflets against Jehovah's Witnesses. The leaflet contained many slanderous and false statements regarding Jehovah's Witnesses and their beliefs. Complaints were filed with the Regional Prosecutor's Office.

In an 18 January 2011 decision, the district prosecutor declined to initiate pre-trial proceedings against the local VMRO party and its leader despite admitting that VMRO had instigated religious hatred. An appeal was filed first to the appellate prosecutor's office, which was rejected, and then to the Supreme Cassation Prosecutor's Office. On 12 February 2012, the appeal was again rejected. Consideration is being given to further appeals, either within Bulgaria or to the European Court of Human Rights.

- **Varna.** On 21 February 2010, a group of VMRO supporters attempted to disrupt the Witnesses' worship services held in a rented facility in Varna. The local police prevented the disruption and the services were held without interruption. However, the next day VMRO aired a slanderous program on a local TV station vowing to 'fight against Jehovah's Witnesses until they disappear from Varna.' A complaint was filed with the prosecutor's office, which referred the matter to the regional prosecutor's office. The regional prosecutor's office refused to initiate pre-trial proceedings against the local VMRO party leaders and dismissed the complaint. An appeal submitted to the district prosecutor's office was also dismissed. Consideration is being given to further appeals, either within Bulgaria or to the European Court of Human Rights.

#### ***Mob attacks and assaults***

- **Burgas.** The VMRO political party, together with fans of two major football teams in Burgas, organized a protest against Jehovah's Witnesses inviting many journalists, although the protest was not sanctioned by the Burgas Municipality. In advance of the protest, one of the Burgas Congregation elders went directly to the Burgas Police Department on 16 April 2011 to request protection but the threat was not taken seriously.

On the evening of 17 April 2011, the local congregation (including women, children, and elderly ones) was peacefully gathered at their Kingdom Hall for the annual commemoration of Christ's death, when about 60 protesters in hooded jackets and dark sunglasses, and waving VMRO flags, violently attacked the attendants at the entrance of the Kingdom Hall.



The assailants forcibly broke the entrance door of the auditorium, threw large rocks, firecrackers and smoke bombs and shouted insults. The Witness attendants blocking the entrance were repeatedly pummeled with blows. Many of those in attendance called the police immediately but the police, despite having advance notice of the protest, were slow to respond. Five attendants required emergency hospital treatment for their injuries, including concussions and a

broken nose requiring surgery. The building was vandalized a number of times since the 17 April 2011 incident, including an arson attempt. The most recent incident was reported to the police on 8 June 2012.

The Burgas Prosecutor's Office investigated the attack and reached a settlement with seven perpetrators, fining each of them BGN 200 (USD 125). The Prosecutor's decision of 16 July 2012 left the leader of the mob, Mr. Georgi Drakaliev, unpunished and terminated the penal proceedings against him. Failure to hold Mr. Drakaliev responsible, the one who incited members and supporters of his political party to such a cruel display of religious hatred, gives the impression that Bulgaria is not interested in the rights of minority groups living there.

On 30 July 2012, an appeal filed against the Prosecutor's decision.

- **Plovdiv.** On 24 January 2012, two female Jehovah's Witnesses (Elena Slavcheva and Maria Raichkova) were peacefully carrying out their Christian ministry in the town of Plovdiv. When calling on one apartment, a man opened the door and asked them who they were and what they were doing. The two women tried to start a friendly conversation with the man about the Bible. After they said they are Jehovah's Witnesses, the man started to push them towards the elevator. Since the man was aggressive, and the elevator was slow in coming, the two women decided to take the stairs. As they descended the man aggressively chased after them, insulting them and warning them not to speak to any of his neighbors. The two women kindly asked him to calm down. However, the man started to push them and even hit Ms. Raichkova on the head with his fist. The man screamed: "I will kill you. I will kill you even if I have to go to prison!" He chased after them all the way down to the entrance door insulting and threatening them. Later the same day Ms. Raichkova went to the hospital where it was confirmed that she had suffered head trauma because of the attack. They went to the police but were informed that they must file a written complaint, which both victims have done.
- **Sofia.** On 11 January 2012, two Witnesses (Vladimir Percheklii and Sevdalina Gencheva) were sharing their beliefs with the residents of an apartment building. When they rang the doorbell of one apartment, a man answered from inside saying that he did not want any information. The two Witnesses left, using the stairs. On their way down the man followed them and started to push, insult, and threaten the two Witnesses. He spat in their faces, saying: "Let your God save you now!" He then chased after the Witnesses and beat them on their heads with a wooden cane.

- **Gabrovo.** On 8 May 2012, an 18-year-old Witness, Blagovest Mitkov, was attacked by two skinheads near his home. Before attacking him, the two young men yelled, “Sectarian!” This unprovoked assault included kicks to the head. Following the incident, Blagovest immediately sought medical attention in the emergency room at the hospital in Gabrovo. His injuries included a cranial contusion and pain in his right arm. The next day he filed a complaint with the police, which included an official medical report documenting his injuries. Some days after the attack the police took one of the attackers into custody though he claimed to know nothing about the attack. Should the police terminate the investigation due to lack of evidence, Blagovest will file a private penal complaint with the Prosecutor’s Office.
- **Gabrovo.** On 13 May 2012, a 27-year-old Witness, Alexander Stefanov, was attacked by two young skinheads. They approached Alexander and asked him if he was “from the sect of Jehovah’s Witnesses.” He did not respond. Suddenly, the men attacked Alexander with their fists. He tried to escape, but the men chased him and shouted insults at him such as, “Sectarian!” The men overtook Alexander, beating and kicking him until he lost consciousness. He was taken to hospital where he remained for four days. Alexander has filed a complaint with the prosecutor in Gabrovo.

More than four months have passed since these assaults in Gabrovo occurred and still the police investigators delay in issuing their findings and indicting the accused.

#### ***Intolerance on the part of some officials***

- **Kyustendil.** The lack of respect for religious freedom among some local authorities is reflected in statements made by Petar Paunov, the mayor of Kyustendil. After the Kyustendil municipality denied the request for re-zoning of a property in order for Jehovah’s Witnesses to build a house of worship, Mr. Paunov slanderously stated to the media, “There is no room for sects, no room for people who abuse children.” “I am not going to issue a permit for the construction of such churches ... while I am the mayor, it won’t happen!” Mr. Paunov also falsely accused Jehovah’s Witnesses of working with teachers to target children and then called on parents to protect their children from the Witnesses. On 22 June 2012 an appeal was filed with the Kyustendil Administrative Court against the decision of the municipality.

#### ***A respectful request***

Jehovah’s Witnesses respectfully request the government of Bulgaria to affirm its commitment to religious freedom by putting an end to the discriminatory actions of local authorities and by acting to stop violent attacks through prosecution of the attackers.

***A delegation of Jehovah’s Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of Bulgaria attending the present conference in order to clarify any misunderstanding and to promote a constructive dialogue.***