OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION FACING JEHOWAH’S WITNESSES IN RUSSIA

Since the mid 1990’s, elements of the Russian government and the Orthodox Church launched a campaign against Jehovah’s Witnesses with the ultimate aim of banning their activities throughout Russia. The harassment increased dramatically since 2008 when the Russian authorities began misapplying the Federal Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity (Extremism Law) to Jehovah’s Witnesses.

When the Extremism Law was originally written in 2002, extremism was partly defined as “incitement to social, racial, national, or religious discord, associated with violence or calls to violence.” There was no apparent attempt at the time to apply the law to Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, in 2006 the law was amended and the earlier definition of extremism was changed by removing the phrase “associated the violence or calls to violence.” Jehovah’s Witnesses first learned that the Russian authorities were linking them to extremist activity through a 2007 letter signed by V. Ya. Grin, the Russian Federation Deputy General Prosecutor.

By February 2009, the Russian Federation General Prosecutor’s Office issued a directive to all regional prosecutors’ offices ordering investigations to be carried out on the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses with the participation of the Ministry of Interior, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Ministry of Justice, and other governmental agencies. In addition, new legislation expanding the power of the FSB is not well defined, allowing the FSB to intimidate and harass religious minorities at its own discretion.

These actions have had a major impact on Jehovah’s Witnesses as a religious organization and as individuals. Since February 8, 2009, there have been over 1,000 incidents of religious intolerance including police raids in private homes and places of worship, arson attacks, arrests and detentions. Their aggregation has created a climate of marginalization and discrimination that Jehovah’s Witnesses have not experienced since the Soviet era.

The following major events have occurred since December 2009:

- **68 Religious Publications of Jehovah’s Witnesses Posted on the Federal List of Extremist Materials issued by the Ministry of Justice**

  December 8, 2009: the Russian Federation Supreme Court upheld an earlier decision of the Rostov Regional Court to liquidate the Local Religious Organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Taganrog and declare as extremist 34 religious publications.

  January 27, 2010: the Supreme Court of the Altay Republic upheld an earlier decision of the Gorno-Altaysk City Court to declare an additional 18 religious publications as extremist.

  October 28, 2010: the Zavodskiy District Court in Kemerovo declared six more religious publications as extremist. It was only on January 18, 2011, when the publications appeared on the Federal List of Extremist Materials that Jehovah’s Witnesses became aware of the clandestine ruling.
April 22, 2011: the Pervomayskiy District Court of Krasnodar declared four religious publications as extremist. Of these publications, the Rostov Regional Court previously declared two of them as extremist and another one not to be extremist. The publications have not yet been added to the List of Extremist Materials.

May 30, 2011: the Zavodskiy District Court in Kemerovo declared two more religious publications as extremist. On July 18, 2011, the publications were added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Jehovah’s Witnesses learned of the decision only after the media reported that the list was updated.

June 27, 2011: the Salsk City Court ruled to pronounce extremist nine publications; however six of the publications were already on the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

- **Criminal Investigations Launched Against Members of Jehovah’s Witnesses**

  Individual Jehovah’s Witnesses are being criminally charged for “incitement to hatred or enmity and denigration of human dignity” for allegedly distributing “extremist” literature. There are currently 10 open criminal investigations in Russia that give license for the Russian authorities, including the FSB, to invade the private lives of Jehovah’s Witnesses to ostensibly gather “evidence” to bring criminal charges against them under the Extremism Law.

  Despite a favorable verdict in the case of Aleksandr Kalistratov in Gorno-Altaysk after two trials and two appeals, the same charges are being brought against other Jehovah’s Witnesses. There are currently three trials in progress—against Maksim Kalinin in Yoshkar-Ola, Andrey and Lyutsiya Raitin in Chita, and Yelena Grigoryeva in Akhtubinsk.

- **Government-Sponsored Harassment Campaign and Other Human Rights Violations**

  Since December 2009, there have been over 1000 incidents of assaults, arson attacks, police detentions, searches and seizure of literature, and raids on private homes and places of worship. (Please see [http://www.jw-media.org/rus/incidents_map_e.htm](http://www.jw-media.org/rus/incidents_map_e.htm))

  Major internet providers throughout Russia blocked access to the [www.jw.org](http://www.jw.org) and [www.watchtower.org](http://www.watchtower.org) Web sites (official Web sites of Jehovah’s Witnesses).

- **License to Distribute Religious Journals Revoked**

  On April 26, 2010, the Federal Service for Oversight of Communications, Information Technologies, and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor), revoked the distribution license of the Watchtower and Awake! magazines in Russia. Since permission for distribution provided the legal basis for importing both magazines, Jehovah’s Witnesses cannot import them into the country.

  After filing complaints and receiving unfavorable decisions in the Moscow City Arbitration Court and the 9th Appeal Arbitration Court of Moscow, attorneys for the Administrative Center filed a cassation appeal with the Federal Arbitration Court of the Moscow Circuit. On June 29, 2011, the Federal Arbitration Court declared the earlier decisions invalid and ordered a retrial. On October 6, 2011, the Moscow City Arbitration Court ruled in favor of the Administrative Center. However, the Roskomnadozor appealed, and on January 25, 2012, the 9th Appeal Arbitration Court of Moscow annulled the favorable decision. The Administrative Center is appealing this decision.

- **Russian Government Disregards European Court of Human Rights Judgment**

  On June 10, 2010, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) unanimously ruled that the liquidation and ban on the activities of the Moscow Community of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia was unlawful. Additionally, on December 13, 2010, the panel of the Grand Chamber announced its rejection of Russia’s bid to have the case reviewed. In 2011, the Moscow Community submitted applications to reregister in three Moscow courts and the Moscow City Justice Department. All the applications were dismissed. The Community of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Moscow is still liquidated and its activity is still banned.

  For more details see [http://www.jw-russia.org](http://www.jw-russia.org)

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