



GENERAL INCORPORATED ASSOCIATION  
ASIA-PACIFIC ASSOCIATION OF  
**JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES**



THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF  
**JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES**

5 April 2023

**In behalf of**

**The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses**

**And**

**Asia-Pacific Association of Jehovah's Witnesses**

**Contribution for the**

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**Uzbekistan**

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## **ABOUT THE SUBMITTING ORGANIZATIONS**

**The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses (EAJW)** is a charity registered in the United Kingdom (No. 1085157) with membership throughout the member States of the Council of Europe.

**Asia-Pacific Association of Jehovah's Witnesses (APAJW)** is a general incorporated association registered in Japan with membership in Australia, Fiji, Guam, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tahiti, Taiwan and Thailand.

These associations work together to promote the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in various parts of the world, particularly when Jehovah's Witnesses face violations of such rights. This submission is prepared and submitted jointly.

## SUMMARY OF THE SUBMISSION

This submission to the Human Rights Council (HRC) on Uzbekistan highlights human rights issues and current failures to implement recommendations accepted by Uzbekistan during the previous Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycle.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan and as a worldwide organization respectfully request the Government of Uzbekistan to:

- (1) Provide realistic opportunities for Jehovah's Witnesses to register local religious organizations (LROs) throughout the country;
- (2) End the censorship of religious literature;
- (3) Ensure that police and other officials do not interfere with the peaceful manifestation of beliefs by Jehovah's Witnesses;
- (4) Enforce media standards prohibiting libel and slander;
- (5) Abide by its commitment to uphold the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and legislation of Uzbekistan and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (the Covenant) for all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

### I. INTRODUCTION

1. Jehovah's Witnesses have been present and active in Uzbekistan since the 1950s. Jehovah's Witnesses were first registered in Uzbekistan in 1994, as the Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses of the Town of Chirchiq and the Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses of the Town of Fergana. They were reregistered in those towns in 1999. In 2006, the authorities liquidated the Fergana community and have since permitted no other registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan, despite their presence throughout the country. The Government of Uzbekistan considers any religious activity by Jehovah's Witnesses outside of the one registered religious building in Chirchiq to be illegal, including possession of religious literature and of the Holy Bible itself.
2. Jehovah's Witnesses have made numerous attempts to register LROs in various cities, but without success. The governance and procedures of the local authorities are neither uniform nor prescribed by law, making it impossible for the Witnesses to acquire the documentation needed for registration. Uzbek courts at all levels have dismissed the complaints of the Witnesses, leading them to file two communications with the Human Rights Committee, in 2020 and 2021. While the laws of Uzbekistan recognize the right to freedom of religion, in practice this is not the case.
3. Jehovah's Witnesses occasionally experience pressure to renounce their faith and to practise Islam. During the reporting period, there were also a number of cases in which Witnesses were aggressively questioned by the Uzbekistan authorities and by unknown individuals, probing for more information about the interactions of the Witnesses, including their private conversations.

4. The Uzbekistan media publish defamatory disinformation with impunity about the peaceful beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses, stigmatizing them as "extremists".

## II. ISSUES

5. Uzbekistan acceded to the Covenant on 28 September 1995. However, Jehovah's Witnesses have been unable peacefully to exercise freedom of religion or belief, freedom of opinion and expression or the right to freedom of assembly and association, as guaranteed by, inter alia, articles 18, 19, 21 and 22 of the Covenant. We provide below a non-exhaustive summary of human rights violations experienced by Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan.
6. **Registration:** Since the adoption of the new law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" in 2021, local communities of Jehovah's Witnesses have made several attempts to acquire the necessary documentation for registration. At each step of the process, their efforts have been hindered by the authorities as described below.
7. One requirement for registration is obtaining a "conclusion of the local executive authority", the *khokimiyat*. Each *khokimiyat* sets its own rules for issuing their conclusion, and neither the substantive legislation nor internal protocols regulate this public service. This creates unfettered discretion for unlimited and unpredictable "formal requirements" that the believers effectively "cannot comply with".
8. For example, *khokimiyats* often demand that applicants first obtain approval from local urban planning authorities confirming that the premises to be used as the LRO address comply with urban planning standards. However, local urban planning authorities refuse to issue such conclusions, claiming that "it is not within their authority" to do so. Without confirmation from these authorities, *khokimiyats* refuse to issue documentation.
9. The justice authorities, who are ultimately responsible for registration under the law, are aware of this situation yet decline to intervene. Indeed, they create additional obstacles for LROs by prohibiting the use of non-residential office premises as postal addresses and by unlawfully requiring Jehovah's Witnesses to have a separate building for this purpose.
10. To demonstrate the scale of the problem, we annex two documents setting out the registration attempts made by Jehovah's Witnesses during the periods (1) 2018–2019 and (2) 2021–2022. Efforts to obtain registration were suspended while the COVID-19 pandemic was at its height.
11. **Censorship:** Religious publications are censored by the Committee of Religious Affairs (CRA) of Uzbekistan. Since 2006, the CRA has not allowed any publications of Jehovah's Witnesses to be imported into the country. In practice, the Witnesses have been able to bring in some individual copies of religious literature on their person, but these publications can be shared or distributed only within the confines of their Kingdom Hall property (place of worship) in Chirchiq.
12. Since the censorship law has not changed, religious publications, including the Holy Bible, are still not permissible outside of the religious building in Chirchiq.
13. **Interference with Manifestation of Religious Belief:** Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan experience this interference with rights guaranteed by article 18 (etc.) of the Covenant in many forms. We provide a selection of contemporary examples below.

14. Kagan (Bukhara Region). On 8 September 2021, a group of people including the chairman of the local *mahalla* (neighbourhood committee), a representative of State Security Service, a police chief, a local inspector, the Commissioner of Religious Affairs, and a Muslim mullah came to the house of one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Previously, the local mullah had told children and relatives of the Witness that he would not provide a cemetery plot for her unless she renounced her faith. Subsequently, the delegation outlined above came to make enquiries. During the conversation, some of the secular officials took the side of the mullah.
15. Tashkent. On 10 September 2021, three representatives of the Anti-Extremism and Terrorism Department visited one of Jehovah's Witnesses at her workplace. They told her that a complaint had been filed against her and asked to examine her phone, but she refused to give it to them. They displayed a screenshot of a Telegram messaging chat showing her conversation with a woman, and asked the Witness to confirm in writing that she was trying to convert the woman to her religion. One of the representatives threatened to gather "dirt" on the Witness and questioned her about fellow believers. They claimed that Jehovah's Witnesses have no right to say anything about their beliefs to others outside of their place of worship. One of them said: "Jehovah's Witnesses think that we can't catch them, but we will catch all of them!"
16. Khazorasp (Khorezm Region). On 14 December 2021, a police officer and the chairwoman of the local Committee of Women's Affairs told one of Jehovah's Witnesses that a complaint had been filed against her and demanded that she not share her beliefs with anyone. They added that the first time would be a warning, then a fine, and then two to five years in prison. The conversation was video recorded by the police.
17. Tashkent. On 10 February 2022, a married couple who are Jehovah's Witnesses were peacefully talking with sales assistants, and in casual conversation spoke about the Bible. At that moment a man approached them and introduced himself as a law enforcement officer. The officer took the husband outside, questioned him, verified his passport and attempted to check his phone. The officer stated that the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses is banned in Russia and claimed the couple were engaged in "missionary activity".
18. Samarkand. On 17 February 2022, a group of policemen came to the home of one of Jehovah's Witnesses with a search warrant. They conducted a search in front of eyewitnesses and filmed their actions on video. The police seized personal electronic devices, namely a laptop and three cell phones. At the police station, they found the JW Library® application on one phone and the laptop. Both electronic devices were sent for examination and not returned until three months later, after several requests by the owner.
19. Karshi. On 29 April 2022, one of Jehovah's Witnesses was summoned to the police station. There, two law enforcement officers seized her phone and interrogated her. The Witness was shown a printout screenshot of a Telegram messaging chat where she allegedly shared her beliefs. The officers said the complaint against her came from the "Virtual Reception of the President". They demanded that she write an explanatory note to confirm that she sent the messages. She refused, and the officers confiscated her phone, threatening that an administrative case would be filed against her.
20. **Defamatory Media Coverage:** On 6 April 2022, a video in the Uzbek language, titled *Missionary Activity—Religious and Ideological Divisions, Political Machinations and Prohibitions in the Law*, was posted on YouTube. Purporting to describe the origins of missionary work and its modern manifestations in Uzbekistan, the video is mainly about Jehovah's Witnesses. It covers 1999–2008, during which period persecution of Jehovah's

Witnesses began in Uzbekistan. The reporting is wildly inaccurate and defamatory, and the production appears aimed solely at tarnishing the reputation of the Witnesses.

21. On 6 July 2022, news agency site NUZ.UZ published a defamatory web article in Russian about Jehovah's Witnesses. The article contains disinformation about the Witnesses, describing them as "extremists".

### **III. IMPLEMENTATION OF ACCEPTED RECOMMENDATIONS**

22. Following its previous review in 2018, Uzbekistan supported specific recommendations made by member States. (A/HRC/39/7, para. 101)
23. Subsequently, the Republic of Uzbekistan reaffirmed its commitment to meeting its international human rights obligations, including those under the UPR, and particularly including the recommendations specified. (A/HRC/39/7/Add.1, paras 1, 21, 30 and 31)
24. The report of the Working Group, the views of the State party concerning the recommendations and/or conclusions made, and its voluntary commitments and replies were adopted by the HRC on 20 September 2018. (A/HRC/DEC/39/111) The recommendations that were supported and subsequently accepted included the following.
25. Ghana recommended: "Cease all restrictions on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and ensure that the right to manifest one's religion in private or in public is fully protected and realized." (A/HRC/39/7, para. 101.96)
26. Argentina recommended: "Take the necessary measures to guarantee that all persons can peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression in accordance with international standards." (A/HRC/39/7, para. 101.97)
27. Norway recommended: "Adopt concrete measures to ensure the legitimate exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, association and belief." (A/HRC/39/7, para. 101.98)
28. Ghana further recommended: "Consider removing burdensome and oppressive registration requirements, and rescind intrusive government practices, including monitoring and raiding, which infringe on the right to freedom of religion or belief." (A/HRC/39/7, para. 101.107)
29. Italy recommended: "Adopt effective measures to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief and to prevent related restrictions and discrimination." (A/HRC/39/7, para. 101.109)
30. Canada recommended: "Revise provisions in the country's criminal and administrative codes relating to freedom of religion or belief, so as to conform with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." (A/HRC/39/7, para. 101.110)
31. The United States of America recommended: "Revise so-called religious 'extremism' laws to decriminalize peaceful religious activities, simplify registration requirements for religious groups, and remove penalties on religious literature communications." (A/HRC/39/7, para. 101.111)
32. Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan have seen no evidence of the implementation of these recommendations, even though accepted by Uzbekistan, insofar as they affect the freedom of religion or belief of this body of peaceful believers.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

33. Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan and as a worldwide organization express concern for the inability of their religious community to register throughout the country, to possess personal religious literature, including the Holy Bible, and to practise their peaceful faith free from official harassment and media misrepresentation. They respectfully request the Government of Uzbekistan to take the necessary steps to:

- (1) Provide realistic opportunities for Jehovah's Witnesses to register LROs throughout the country;
- (2) End the censorship of religious literature;
- (3) Ensure that police and other officials do not interfere with the peaceful manifestation of beliefs by Jehovah's Witnesses;
- (4) Enforce media standards prohibiting libel and slander;
- (5) Abide by its commitment to uphold the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and legislation of Uzbekistan and the Covenant for all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses.