

The religious organization, the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, is registered with the Russian Federation ("RF") Ministry of Justice on December 11, 1992, and reregistered on April 29, 1999, in accordance with the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, dated September 26, 1997.

In Russia, over 150,000 Jehovah's Witnesses share their faith with others and meet for worship in approximately 2,100 congregations and groups. In 2007, more than 286,000 persons attended the annual Memorial of the death of Jesus Christ, which is the most important religious observance of the year for Jehovah's Witnesses. There are 409 Local Religious Organizations (LROs) of Jehovah's Witnesses registered in 70 regions of the Russian Federation.

At present a campaign has been initiated against Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation. The campaign is gaining momentum. 400 local religious organizations, are threatened by this groundless investigation.

The most ridiculous accusations are being made against Jehovah's Witnesses, who are being labelled "extremists". This accusation is particularly absurd in view of the fact that the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses promote the elimination of social, national, and racial prejudice. It is well known that Jehovah's Witnesses observe the principle of Christian neutrality and do not participate in political disputes.

Incidents of Attack, Police Detentions, and Vandalism of Kingdom Halls

There were approximately 12 incidents of physical attacks and 12 incidents of detention of Jehovah's Witnesses. However, the information the Administration Center receives from individual Witnesses is incomplete, and it is presumed that the total number of such incidents are significantly higher. Additionally, there were eight reported attacks of vandalism and three arson attacks on Kingdom Halls.

The most overt act against Jehovah's Witnesses occurred on 14 July 2008 when an arson attack was made on a meeting hall at Chekhov. One sinister aspect of the case is that there is clear evidence that a large quantity of petrol was used as a flame accelerant to ensure the complete destruction of, rather than mere damage to, the building. But the complicity or collusion of state authorities is demonstrated by the actions (or inactions) of both police and fire authorities. Although the local authority's fire appliances are modern and stationed a mere 4 kilometres from the building, the two appliances despatched in response to the emergency call for help were observed to have deliberately stopped short of the fire by some 300 metres and to have let it burn. It was only when a neighbour, fearing for the spread of the fire to her dwelling house, demanded that they tackle the fire that both appliances then moved to the site. Even then, only one crew was deployed and in a desultory fashion, connecting only one hose when valves for three were readily available. The second crew of four did not even deploy but remained stolidly in their vehicle. Thus a fire that, if tackled promptly and properly, could well have been contained was allowed to gain such a hold that the building is a total loss and will have to be demolished. Meanwhile, police arrived on the scene but, despite requests for help in salvaging material from the building, stood idly by.

A fire investigator found clear signs of flame accelerant and several seats of fire to negative accidental cause and point inevitably to arson. Several lids of petrol containers were subsequently found in close proximity to the fire. Despite that evidence, no investigation into the fire has even been opened. A selection of photographs are attached hereto in annex.

Disruptions of Meetings

Despite the clear judgment of the ECHR in the case of *Kuznetsov v. Russia*, raids on Christian meetings are being conducted frequently, the most recent example being in Chekhov, Moscow Region. There members of the FSB broke up a meeting and detained those attending for over 8 hours. They also seized from the meeting hall a quantity of literature.

The actions of the FSB are in clear violation of the European Court of Human Rights decisions in *Kuznetsov v. Russia*, 11 January 2007, and *Kokkinakis v. Greece*, 25 May 2003, which held that Jehovah's Witnesses were entitled to the protection of freedom of religion under Article 9 of the Convention. In the *Kuznetsov* Court stated:

“It is undeniable that the collective study and discussion of religious texts by the members of the religious group of Jehovah's Witnesses was a recognised form of manifestation of their religion in worship and teaching. . . . The Court notes that the main purpose of the applicants' gathering on 16 April 2000 was to join in Biblical study and public worship. In doing so they undeniably exercised their rights to freedom of expression and to freedom of peaceful assembly under Articles 10 and 11 of the Convention. (§§53 and 57).”

On August 9, 2007, a religious service of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tambov was broken up by law-enforcement agencies. Approximately 100 persons were detained, including children and elderly persons, for over three hours with no charges being made against them. Subsequent to this, the prosecutor's office filed a claim to ban the Tainbov LRO.

On March 15, 2008, at 11:30 a.m., in the city of Penza, the local police broke up a religious assembly of approximately 300 people at a rented facility. The police informed the organizers that the assembly was illegal, since they did not inform the local authorities “as required” by the Federal Law on Assemblies, Rallies, Demonstrations, Processions, and Pickets. Those who organized the assembly were ordered to stop the program, which they did. On March 18, 2008, the Justice of the Peace for Section No. 2 of the Zheleznodorozhniy District of Penza found Nikolay Parshin guilty of an administrative violation and fined him 1,500 rubles (approximately US\$57). Mr. Parshin appealed, but on April 7, 2008, the Zheleznodorozhniy District Court upheld the ruling. Both before the Justice of the Peace and in his subsequent appeal to the district court, Mr. Parshin referred to the *Kuznetsov* European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgment and recent Russian case law showing that the above-mentioned law did not apply to religious meetings. However, neither the Justice of the Peace nor the district court took these rulings into consideration or even mentioned them in their decisions. A supervisory appeal has been prepared and will be filed shortly.

On February 7, 2008, in the city of Asbest, Sverdlovsk Region, officials from the prosecutor's office, the FSB, and the police arrived at the building where religious services of Jehovah's Witnesses are conducted, seizing religious literature, and taking written statements from those in attendance. The investigator for the Asbest City Prosecutor's Office revealed that the literature had been seized for an expert study, and that a criminal case would be instigated.

During the Moscow case, the Prosecutor, Mr Viktorov, who lodged the original action to ban and liquidate our community, had publicly stated in respect of the proceedings in the *Golovinskiy* Court: "If the court finds the sect to be totalitarian, it will be banned across the country... This trial is a precedent. Therefore, the result is just as important for us as it is for the [religious] community. This is a matter of principle for me, and I will stand for it to the very end".

It is that very prediction which is now coming to fulfilment. There are clear indications of coordinated action by authorities amounting to persistent harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses. The situation has hardened with the implementation of new legislation on "extremist" activity and/or literature, which is being unfairly abused to categorise Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" organisation.

Action against the Administrative Center

In pursuance of the threat of Mr Viktorov, there is clear evidence that strenuous efforts are now being made by the Prosecutor General to close down the religious community's national Administrative Centre. There has emerged a pattern of harassment under the guise of official enquiries. These range over finance, taxation, VAT, customs duty, labour laws, visas, health and safety, food hygiene, and other miscellaneous matters. The hallmark is frequent peremptory demands from the Prosecutor for a responsible officer to present himself at less than 24 hours notice to produce documents, some relating to current transactions but many to transactions that have been archived and are not readily available. Non-compliance is a serious matter and wholly disproportionate time and resources of the Christian community have to be deployed to respond in a timely manner.

In an attempt to stem the flow of harassment, the Directors of the Administrative Centre brought proceedings in the St Petersburg court against the Prosecutor alleging abuse of power and seeking orders to restrain the harassment. In support of his defence the Prosecutor relied on, and the Judge accepted, the very *Golovinskiy* proceedings and judgment that are the subject of the Application before the ECHR. The reliance by both Prosecutor and Judge upon that judgment demonstrates irrefutably the impact that those proceedings have had and more importantly continue to have in the continuing attack on Jehovah's Witnesses. The clear indication is that the Prosecutor will continue to rely upon *Golovinskiy* in his unfounded assertions that Jehovah's Witnesses are engaged in "extremist activity".

Interference with rental contracts

As permits to acquire land and build meeting halls are almost unobtainable, we rely on renting halls and meeting places from private and municipal owners. In various regions of Russia Jehovah's Witnesses have met with serious difficulties in conducting their yearly conventions (The North Ossetian, Udmurt, and Chuvash Republics; the Krasnodar and Perm Territories; the Irkutsk, Kirov, Murmansk, Nizhegorod, and Sverdlovsk Regions, and others). There is clear evidence that members of the FSB have been calling on or otherwise contacting owners, informing them untruthfully that Jehovah's Witnesses are a banned and dangerous organisation, and forbidding them to let their premises be used for such meetings. New rental contracts have been refused and existing contracts unilaterally cancelled. The common theme, as with the other matters, is the citation of the *Golovinskiy* judgment.

Literature

The publication of Christian literature, including *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines and books designed as Bible study aids, which circulate freely throughout the member states of the Council of Europe and the rest of the democratic world, and for years has been accepted as perfectly legitimate material, is now stigmatised as "extremist". Actions are being taken in several locations, including the city of Asbest, Sverdlovsk Region, to ban the literature.

According to the Conclusion of the State Religious Expert Study of the Expert Council of the RF Ministry of Justice dated April 15, 1999, "The literature of Jehovah's Witnesses does not contain calls to... violence, incitement to social, racial, national or religious discord."

Conclusion

We appeal to the authorities from the Russian Federation to promptly take positive steps to protect the freedom of religion of Jehovah's Witnesses and to put an end to this orchestrated campaign by giving a clear signal to all governmental agencies that Jehovah's Witnesses have nothing to do with extremism.