

# **RUSSIA: Case of Danish Jehovah's Witness continues**

*Summary of hearings in case of Danish believer in Orel*

Russia Religion News (09.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2K1i0m0> – In October 2018, in the Zheleznodorozhny district court of the city of Orel, 11 court sessions were held in the case of the Danish subject Dennis Christensen, who faces up to 10 years incarceration (on the basis of part 1 of article 282.2 of the CC of the RF) merely for the fact that he professes the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. The case is being heard by Judge Aleksei Rudnev.

On 8, 10, 15-17, and 22-24 October 2018, the court examined religious books in digital format that were discovered on a computer seized from Dennis Christensen. In the courtroom, separate fragments from these books and brochures were read, specifically encouraging the maintenance of peaceful relations with people and the strengthening of family ties, especially if a life partner has a different religion.

The prosecution called attention to fragments explaining who are the elders of a Christian congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses and what their pastoral concern consists of and what personal requirements they must meet. In particular, the instructions enumerated in the New Testament that each of them "must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, moderate in habits, sensible, self-disciplined, hospitable, and capable of teaching, and they should not cause drunken scandals or beat others but be reasonable, not belligerent, not love money, and

manage their households well. . . .” It was left for the lawyers merely to note that the image of the person described is entirely unlike that of a criminal. The prosecutor also called attention to a quotation from the New Testament Acts of the Apostles: “It is necessary to obey God rather than men.” When Dennis Christensen was asked: “Do you know instances when Jehovah’s Witnesses refused to obey laws of the state, making a choice in favor of the laws of God?” he answered that he knows of one such case, when German Jehovah’s Witnesses during World War II went to concentration camps instead of the eastern front, refusing to kill Russian soldiers.

The lawyers also called attention to the fact that not one of the books or brochures found by the prosecution had been ruled to be “extremist.”

On 24 October 2018, the court again extended Christensen’s term of detention in custody by three months, until 1 February 2019. The next day an appeal was filed against this order.

On 29 October 2018, the court studied electronic files from tablets seized from other believers. The prosecution interprets the very fact that the citizens used books in electronic form as measures of conspiracy. Lawyers consider such an interpretation far-fetched.

In describing the seized files, the investigator considered without basis that they belonged to the local religious organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Orel. When lawyers called attention to this, the judge asked the prosecutor whether the files contain any information about the local

religious organization. The prosecutor had to respond that they do not. Christensen also explained that he has nothing to do with these files.

In reviewing other evidence of Christensen's guilt included in the case by investigators, the lawyers called the court's attention to photographs where Christensen and his wife were shown in a supermarket alongside a person in a costume of a fairytale character. The lawyers asked what these and many other pieces of "evidence" prove. They do not prove anything and they have been introduced into the case merely for volume, which shows the essence of this criminal case as based on nothing, the lawyers concluded.

On 30 October 2018 the court continued to examine materials of the case. The prosecutor read various bank statements from 2016. In depicting them, the prosecutor several time repeated the phrase "it has no significance for this criminal case," so that the judge asked: "If the materials have no significance for this case, then why are we wasting time here?" The prosecutor refused to read the next protocol consisting of 48 points.

In trying to prove Christensen's guilt, the prosecution added to the materials of the case a certificate from a military commission regarding nine conscripts who refused service in the army, citing their religious convictions. The lawyers called attention to the fact that the prosecution's use of the wording "refused service in the army" is incorrect inasmuch as the state provides alternative service for citizens. In selecting alternative service, a citizen is following the law strictly. Then the lawyer read out where each of these nine youths had been sent for conducting alternative service. Some

served in the Russian postal service and others in a gerontology center caring for elderly people. The lawyer suggested thinking about the feelings of the elderly for whom these people were caring and how grateful they were to them. Without any doubt, the young believers were fulfilling their civic duty to the state.

On 31 October 2018, the initiative in surveying the materials of the case was passed to the defense. Lawyers called the judge's attention to the fact that after the case was opened against Christensen, the investigation did not arrest him for some time. That means that the investigator himself did not think that Christensen could flee. Consequently, his detention in custody is without grounds.

In addition, lawyers identified defects in the expert analyses existing in the case.

Subsequent sessions in this case are scheduled for 6, 7, 12, and 14 November 2018 in the Zheleznodorozhny district court of Orel (45-a Maxim Gorky St.). (tr. by PDS, posted 11 November 2018)

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## **SYRIA: ‘Next time we will not survive’ – Middle East Christian refugee**

World Watch Monitor (12.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20Jj9F0> – As many as 80% of Syria’s Christians have left their country since the start of the civil war in 2011, while 50% of Iraq’s Christians have been uprooted since 2006, according to a report produced by Christian charities Open Doors International, Served and Middle East Concern in June last year. The arrival of IS was only the “tipping point” of a trend already gathering pace as Christians experienced an “overall loss of hope for a safe and secure future”, the report said.

Lebanon received the most refugees and in December 2016 the advocacy group ADF International heard some of their stories, which they have now shared with World Watch Monitor. In the snippets below, the interviewees are referred to by their initials alone, to preserve their safety.

“We lived in Mosul [northern Iraq] until 2005 [when] bullets

were shot into our home. Between June and July, 2005, terrorists tried to kidnap our son three times, but he was able to escape,” said S. H., a Christian father of five, adding that after this he moved with his family, including three disabled children, to Qaraqosh, 30km southeast of Mosul.

Three months after Islamic State arrived there, on 6 August 2014, the family fled again. “They gave us three options: conversion, death or jizya [a special tax for non-Muslims],” said S. H., adding that this time they fled to Lebanon – because “it is Christian and Arab-speaking”.

Another man, a 43-year-old father of two girls, identified by his first initial, N., fled to Lebanon in February 2015 after IS gave him 24 hours written notice to leave Baghdad, his job and his home, or he and his family would be killed.

“My relatives – my cousin and his grandparents – were killed by bombings at their home, because they didn’t want to quit their job or convert. Colleagues of mine were kidnapped. Some were freed for US\$16,000, others were killed. They were told they must deny Jesus or they would be killed,” he said.

It is difficult to assess how many people have been killed by IS but mass graves were found last week, some of which contained thousands of bodies.

### ***‘Christians must not be alive’***

For 70 years another Christian family, identified as S. and

H.K., had resided in the city of Hasakah, northeast Syria, where they lived at peace with their Muslim neighbours, S. told ADF. All that changed with the arrival of Islamic State.

“Our neighbours joined IS [and the group] used [them] to communicate with us [that we had] three options: convert, leave, or die. They burned our farm at night to kill us, but we were not there. We escaped, going from village to village. We have two brothers, but now we don’t know anything about them. We have had no contact since we fled,” S. said.

A 71-year-old Catholic Christian, identified as H. S. H., recalls how he and his brother fled Aleppo, Syria on 27 December 2013, to find refuge at his farm in Raqqa, only to find further danger. “Our taxi driver was shot in the neck. My brother and I were assaulted and then locked up in the chicken stag pen, a dark room. We were locked up for three days. This was the last time I saw my brother. Our captors wanted to know if we were the owners of the farm. They stole my money. My neighbours later told me that this was IS,” he said.

“We were fed dog food, and they told me that Christians must not be alive. We were told: convert to Islam, or be killed. They told me if I converted, they would give the farm back to me. The jizya was also an option. But some of my neighbours, who were Armenian, were killed after paying jizya.”

He said he was able to escape when the Syrian army attacked IS, with the help of his Muslim neighbours, and that he fled to Lebanon as he had heard the UN could help him. “I have waited three years. The UN has not helped me directly. I had

an interview at the French embassy; they told me it would take 20 days to get back to me. It has been two months," he said.

At the time of the interview he lived with friends in Beirut and had survived three heart attacks. "I do not want to go back to Raqqa or Aleppo," he said. "I have had too much trauma and could never go back. I don't want to remember what happened. It is too difficult."

### ***Psychological trauma***

The same is true for a Chaldean Christian family from Batnaya, northern Iraq. They had not been able to flee because of illness in the family, when IS entered the town in August 2014. Militants came to their house repeatedly, threatening to rape and kill them if they would not convert or if they called on anyone for help.

"After 22 days, IS took our whole family into El Sharkat prison in Mosul and stole everything we had," the 63-year-old father, identified as G. H. G., said.

"[They] separated my 14-year-old son and me from my wife, daughter and our handicapped child. I thought they would kill my son and me, and I did not know what would happen to my family. After four days they took my son and me to another prison, in Kirkuk, where we were for five days until they released us. In the meantime, [my wife] had been released from prison because of our handicapped child. She took our daughter and our handicapped child to a church in Kirkuk. This is where



we were reunited.”

Fearing for their lives, they fled to Beirut, but he said his daughter has psychological trauma and that they will never go back: “We escaped death by a miracle ... Next time we will not survive.”

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## **GERMANY: German Jews call for anti-Semitism classes for Muslim immigrants**

*Germany's federation of Jews says Muslim immigrants need special classes to counter anti-Semitic beliefs. They also*

***condemned the AfD for normalizing anti-Semitism in Germany.***

By Alistair Walsh

DW (05.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2DAiHXc> – Germany's Central Council of Jews on Sunday called for combating anti-Semitism among new Muslim immigrants through education.

Vice President Abraham Lehrer told the Protestant Press Service that he expects anti-Semitism among immigrants to become more of a problem as they become more settled in Germany.

“The problem of immigrant Arab-Islamic anti-Semitism still lies ahead of us. Many of these people were influenced by regimes in which anti-Semitism is part of the rationale of the state and the Jewish state is denied the right to existence,” Lehrer said.

“When these people no longer think only of jobs and housing, this influence will have a greater bearing and people will express their opinions openly. In order to prevent this scenario, we need to tailor integration courses more closely to these people, preferably by country of origin.

“What is needed are additional hours (in integration classes) in which fundamental values such as democracy and the treatment of women in our society are taught intensively.”

Lehrer was speaking ahead of the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the seminal pogrom in which Jewish houses, synagogues and businesses were torched across the country with the implicit blessing of authorities.

### ***AfD provides platform for anti-Semitism***

Speaking more broadly about anti-Semitism in Germany, particularly in regard to the rise of the far right, Lehrer said the current climate in Germany reminded him of attitudes at the end of the Weimar Republic.

Anti-Semitism had surged in Germany with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 and the rise of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party.

“We are concerned about the spread of anti-Semitism. I still encounter old sentiments of resentment in line with the principle ‘the Jews dominate television and the banking and financial world,’” he said.

He said authorities had failed to adequately condemn and prosecute anti-Semitism on display at neo-Nazi marches, such as those in Chemnitz.

Lehrer said the AfD, while not explicitly anti-Semitic, had helped foster anti-Semitic attitudes.

“At the very least (the AfD) creates a platform on which anti-Semitism can grow and manifest itself openly. In its draft party manifesto, for example, the party opposes circumcision and shechita (Jewish method of animal slaughter),” he said.

“Radical representatives such as Björn Höcke relativize the Holocaust and are apparently supported by a broad majority. The AfD is a kind of catalyst for various groups with anti-Semitic roots. It deliberately transgresses boundaries and thus contributes to anti-Semitic attitudes being regarded as normal.”

He called on states to introduce an anti-Semitism commissioner to signal that the government was concerned about the issue and devoted special attention to it.

**HRWF Comment:** Highly recommended reading: [“The Roots of Antisemitism in the Middle East: New Debates”](#)

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## **FRANCE: Anti-Semitic acts up 69 percent in France in 2018, prime minister says**

*Anti-Semitic acts in France rose by 69 percent in the first nine months of 2018, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe said Friday, on the 80th anniversary of the infamous “Kristallnacht” attacks on Jews in Nazi Germany.*

France 24 (09.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Dj2WmS> – Kristallnacht (also known as the Night of Broken Glass) refers to the smashed windows of Jewish shops and homes that happened in Nazi Germany during a heightened wave of violent anti-Jewish pogroms that took place on November 9-10, 1938. At least 91 Jewish people were killed and up to 30,000 men were rounded up and taken to concentration camps.

“Every aggression perpetrated against one of our citizens because they are Jewish echoes like the breaking of new crystal,” Prime Minister Édouard Philippe wrote in the statement on Facebook, referring to Kristallnacht.

“Why recall, in 2018, such a painful memory? Because we are very far from being finished with anti-Semitism,” he said, calling the number of acts “relentless”.

After a record high in 2015, anti-Semitic acts fell by 58 percent in 2016 and went down a further 7 percent last year.

France has the largest Jewish population in Europe and the third-largest Jewish population in the world. However, despite Jewish people making up less than 1 percent of the French population, they were the targets of nearly 40 percent of the violent acts in France classified as racially or religiously motivated in 2017.

And according to Phillippe, there has been a 69 percent rise in anti-Semitic acts in the first nine months of this year.

Günther Jikeli, a German historian at Indiana University who conducted a significant study of Muslim anti-Semitism in Europe, said the causes of this dramatic spike are difficult to identify. “The only two countries with reliable data on anti-Semitism are the UK and France,” he said. “Rises in anti-Semitism often happen in correlated waves in the two countries, and last year there was a major wave in the UK.”

### ***‘Unite and speak out’***

“Anti-Semitism is often in the minds of many people, but we need to discover what triggers this into action,” said Jikeli.

“Sometimes people feel emboldened in the wake of another anti-Semitic act, like the Pittsburgh attack” on a Jewish synagogue that killed 11 people in October.

The murder of an 85-year-old Jewish woman in her home last spring left many in France aghast.

“The murder of Mireille Knoll in March shocked and outraged so many people, but maybe it also activated others. We know that anti-Semites feel encouraged to take action for many reasons. But, crucially, they can also be discouraged – and international leaders must unite and speak out.”

Philippe quoted Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel as saying that “the real danger, my son, is indifference”, pledging that the French government would not be indifferent.

The government plans to toughen rules on hate speech online next year, pressuring social media giants to do more to remove racist and anti-Semitic content.

Philippe said it would also “experiment with a network of investigators and magistrates who are specially trained in the fight against acts of hate”, which could be extended nationwide.

He added that from mid-November a national team would be mobilised to intervene in schools to support teachers dealing

with anti-Semitism in their classrooms.

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## **GREECE: Church agreement to take 10,000 priests off payroll**

BBC (07.11.2018) – <https://bbc.in/2PlW2EE> – A landmark agreement has been reached in Athens that will end the status of priests and bishops as civil servants and bring Greece a step closer to separation of Church and state.

Some 10,000 Church employees will come off the payroll, although their wages will still be paid as a state subsidy.



The Orthodox Church plays a significant role in public life in Greece.

Some priests and politicians criticised the deal between Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Archbishop Ieronimos.

***What have they agreed?***

The two leaders say the state will continue to pay the clergy's salaries but no longer as civil servants. Greece has been trying to scale back its public sector after years of international bailouts. In 2015, 18% of the workforce was employed by the government.

Payment will be made through an annual subsidy of around €200m (£175m; \$230m), and that fund will not be affected if the Church increases or reduces the number of priests.

In return, the Church will not oppose moves to make the state "religion neutral" and would drop any claim to property once taken over by the state.

This property dispute dates back to 1952, and in their agreement the two sides said they would set up a joint fund to manage and develop sites claimed by both Church and state. Revenues and bills would be split 50-50.

## ***Will anything change in Greece?***

By Kostas Kallergis, BBC News

The deal between the prime minister and archbishop is definitely an important step towards Greece becoming a genuinely secular country, but the Greek Orthodox Church will remain omnipresent in numerous aspects of the Greek state.

Pupils at Greek schools still start their day with a prayer and continue to be taught religion throughout their 12-year mandatory education.

Greek courts have a religious icon hanging above the judge's seat and some public services still have forms which require to know the citizens' religion, despite this being theoretically illegal.

Even at the top political level, every new Greek government, including the last two headed by left-wing Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras, have invited the country's top clergy to sanctify them during the cabinet's swearing-in ceremony.

And despite the archbishop's concessions on constitutional reform, the preamble to the Greek constitution will continue to read "In the name of the Holy and Con-substantial and Indivisible Trinity" – a reference to the fact Greece is not simply Christian, but Christian Orthodox.

This deal is a first step, but there is clearly a very long way ahead before Church and state in Greece are completely separate.

***What is the reaction to the agreement?***

It will have to be approved by Church leaders as well as the government and MPs.

Not everyone is happy. A former education minister in the prime minister's party complained that the salaries of 10,000 priests were being guaranteed when the number of hospital doctors during the bailout years was even smaller.

The association of Greek clerics complained that losing the status of civil servants could deny them existing rights and said priests felt betrayed that they had not been consulted about the deal.

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## **PAKISTAN: Asia Bibi's release day has finally come! Now what?**



BPCA (08.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20vhq4N> – Asia Bibi has been set free from her long-term home under captivity at Multan Jail and we confirmed this with media after news from her family. BPCA will not give any more details to media groups until given the express permission of the family.

Wilson Chowdhry has spoken with the family of Asia Bibi, at

6am UK time on 8th November and they expressed that it is of utmost importance that there be no further speculation on her whereabouts reported by either concerned groups or international media. Asia Bibi, her family and guardians all still face a real and present danger of being killed.

This article is to celebrate the release of Asia Bibi and though general steps brought forth by human rights activists any reports or comments therein about her possible location are not endorsed by BPCA.

Asia Bibi has now seen the light of day after ten years of incarceration, eight of which were on death row after she was falsely accused of blasphemy. The allegation arose after she drank water from a well used by Muslims and offered some to her coworkers who believed she had ritually defiled the well as they considered Christians unclean. Those convicted under Pakistan's blasphemy laws are subject to harsh penalties such as life imprisonment and the death penalty.

Read the full article at <https://bit.ly/20vhq4N>

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# CHINA: Judgement day for China in Geneva



*The Universal Periodic Review of the state of human rights in China at the United Nations saw several major countries publicly denounce the CCP and a major demonstration in front of the Palais des Nations, with Muslim Uyghurs, Tibetan Buddhists, members of The Church of Almighty God, and Bitter Winter, united in exposing the Chinese persecution of all religions.*

By Marco Respinti

Bitter Winter (07.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2JNEr2a> – Every five years, the United Nations Human Rights Council holds a Universal Periodic Review of each member state's human rights record. On Tuesday, November 6, it was the turn of China – a world record holder when it comes to the violation of human rights and religious persecution.

As expected, China had a very rough day. Australia, UK, Canada, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, France, Iceland, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States focused on “transformation through education” camps, where one and a half million inmates, two thirds of them Uyghur Muslim where one and a half million inmates – two thirds of which are Uyghur Muslims and the rest are Tibetan Buddhists and members of religions declared illegal or banned – are subject to inhumane treatment and psychological pressure to induce them to abandon their faith.

China had dispatched to Geneva Le Yucheng, the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs. He offered an arrogant but unconvincing defense of the “transformation through education” camps, claiming that they “free the minds of people affected by extremism.” Mr. Le's speech verged on the ridicule when he explained that the camps offer “free-of-charge vocational training with a diploma after exams to those who had been coerced or lured by extremist groups.” But the speech was also sinister and threatening, as Mr. Le stated that the alternative to the camps would be “suppressing and wiping out” entirely the “extremists,” which in Chinese jargon means physically eliminating them.

To make Mr. Le and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rough day worse, hundreds gathered in front of the Palais des



Nations, the second iconic symbol of the United Nations after the New York headquarters, to express their disappointment and anger, and call on international organizations to stop the persecution and slaughter in China.



The event was organized by the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), the largest organization of the Uyghur diaspora. Representatives of other persecuted ethnic groups and religions were also invited to participate. So, starting at early birds' time from Palais Wilson, on the shore of Lake Lemman, enveloped in the mist and numb of a cold morning, a procession of national flags and photographs of CCP victims set out orderly and peacefully to reach the Palais des Nations. Uyghurs, Tibetans, Inner Mongolians, exiles in Taiwan, human rights activists from Hong Kong, members of The Church of Almighty God, and Catholics shouted slogans against the CCP and President Xi Jinping.



Once at the Palais des Nations, many speakers took turns, representing the communities that crowded the square with their flags and signs, defying cold weather and, after a while, even rain. While banners and signposts wreathed in the wind, after the Uyghur and Tibetan national anthems were played, Mr. Omer Kanat, executive president of the WUC, took the floor.



Sister Sofia  
Wu from The  
Church of  
Almighty God

Then Mr. Dolkun Isa, president of the WUC, followed, among others, by Mr. Jampa Tsering Samdho, a Tibetan parliamentarian in exile; Ms. Kristina Olney of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation in Washington; Sister Sofia Wu from The Church of Almighty God; Mr. René Longet, a former member of the Swiss Parliament and its group for Tibet; Mr. Dolgion Hatgin, president of the People's Party of Inner Mongolia; and Mr. Vincent Metten of the International Campaign for Tibet.

But, more or less out of the program, several Uyghur speakers, victims who escaped persecution in the “transformation through education” camps, also offered their testimonies. A sign, exhibited by a middle-aged Uyghur woman, composed and dignified in her grief, asked, “Where is my sister?” Adding ironically, “She is a medical doctor, she does not need

vocational training.” The allusion is to the CCP’s claim that the camps where, in fact, people are tortured and die, offer “vocational training” to “victims” of religious extremism.

Sister Sofia Wu reminded the crowd that, just as it happens with Uyghurs and Tibetans, thousands of members of The Church of Almighty God are tortured in the Chinese jails and camps, and dozens have died in custody in highly suspicious circumstances.

Bitter Winter was also invited to attend the event. I traveled to Geneva to offer words of greeting, solidarity, and friendship to the rally. I believe that this Tuesday was a great and memorable day. Walking among Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians, all united and marching together for liberty and human rights is not an experience one has every day. To hear the Uyghurs shouting “Free Tibet!”, the Buddhists asking for freedom for the Muslims, and the Christians invoking peace for all faiths was a unique experience. This was not the language of some closet utopian, but a loving experience, forged in the blood shed by all the communities represented at the event.

Many of those marching in Geneva believed the CCP was guilty of terrorism and genocide. Will they be heard by the U.N.? Now, a troika composed of representatives from Hungary, Kenya, and Saudi Arabia—the three countries selected for the task by the Human Rights Council—will prepare a report with recommendations to China, to be completed on November 9.

Some U.N. diplomats are skeptical about the outcome of the process. But perhaps the final recommendations are not even the most important part of the Universal Periodic Review. The summary by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner

for Human Rights composed from the documents submitted by NGOs will remain. It denounced the “transformation through education” camps, the atrocities against the Uyghurs and the Tibetans, and the persecution of the religious groups the regime has banned as xie jiao (“heterodox teachings,”), noting in particular that “during 2014-2018, the Chinese Communist Party’s monitoring, arrest, and persecution had caused at least 500,000 Church of Almighty God (CAG) Christians to flee their home, and several hundred thousand families had been torn apart.”

China can manipulate the information and use its weight to make some documents “disappear” from the U.N. website, as it happened last week. But the Universal Periodic Review has switched on the light, and many crimes the CCP hoped to keep quietly committing in the darkness have now been publicly revealed. I am proud to have been part of this extraordinary day, where Bitter Winter promised to all persecuted minorities in China that it will continue to be a voice for the voiceless and to publish news, documents, and testimonies about the persecution affecting all religions in China.

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# **SOUTH KOREA: South Korean court allows conscientious objection to military service**

The Straits Times (01.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20rI66H> – South Korea's supreme court ruled on Thursday (Nov 1) that moral and religious beliefs are valid reasons to refuse the country's military service, in a case that has implications for hundreds of conscientious objectors.

Almost 65 years after the end of the Korean War, nearly every able-bodied South Korean male between the ages of 18 and 35 must still complete around two years of military service. Anyone refusing the call-up has usually ended up in prison for 18 months, and more than 19,000 conscientious objectors have been jailed since 1950, most of them Jehovah's Witnesses.

But the Supreme Court overturned the conviction of a conscientious objector on Thursday, months after a landmark constitutional court ruling that authorities had to provide an alternative to joining the military.

At the centre of Thursday's case is Jehovah's Witness Oh Seung-hun, who was called up in 2013 but refused, was found guilty, and lost an initial appeal to the high court.

“It is the majority opinion of the supreme court that conscientious objection is... a valid reason (to refuse conscription),” said chief Supreme Court justice Kim Myeong-su.

Punishing conscientious objectors “for refusing conscription on grounds of religious faith, in other words, freedom of conscience, is deemed an excessive constraint to an individual’s freedom of conscience”, he added.

The decision, by a majority of nine votes to four, overturned a previous Supreme Court ruling 14 years ago.

Oh, 34, said he had refused to join the military as doing so went against biblical teaching.

“The bible says that everyone who uses a sword will be killed by a sword,” Oh told AFP. “I expected to suffer for objecting to conscription but I thought the pain I would feel by not listening to my inner voice would be far worse,” he added.

Jehovah’s Witnesses welcomed the ruling, calling it a “huge step forward in ending this policy of imprisoning our fellow believers”.

“Today the Supreme Court has brought South Korea more in line with international norms,” said spokesman Paul Gillies.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, more than 900 similar cases are pending in the South Korean justice system, with another 96 people currently serving prison terms for not fulfilling their duties.

### ***Conscripts killed***

The South remains technically at war with the North, after the 1950-53 Korean War ended in a ceasefire rather than a peace treaty. But the ruling comes amid a dramatic dialling-down of tensions on the peninsula, with Pyongyang taking part in a series of summits with both the South and the US, long its sworn enemy.

Seoul's armed forces rely heavily on conscription, and military service often involves postings to front-line positions on the border with the North.

In May 2010, a North Korean submarine torpedoed the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan, killing 46 sailors including 16 who were on military service. Pyongyang denies responsibility.

In November the same year, the North shelled a South Korean border island, killing two marines – both of them young conscripts.

The social implications of the South's military service are also enormous – men must interrupt or delay either their education or their careers to comply, with Tottenham striker

Son Heung-min a high-profile recent example.

He only secured an exemption – avoiding a potentially ruinous career break – by winning gold at this year’s Asian Games in Indonesia.

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# **RUSSIA: Russia uses Kerch mass killing for hate campaign against Jehovah’s Witnesses**

By Halya Coynash

KHPG (05.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2F4wxCW> – There seems no end to the uses that Russian state propaganda will make of the tragic mass killing in occupied Kerch on October 17. After falsely claiming that the suspected killer “looked like a Tatar”, Russian or Russian-controlled media continued to claim some kind of ‘Ukrainian link’ and even connect the massacre to ‘Right Sector’, the Ukrainian nationalist organization which Russia has demonized since early 2014. The latest target for what is essentially a hate campaign has become the Jehovah’s Witnesses, although here too any link is pure speculation.

One of the aims is doubtless to deflect attention from inconvenient subjects, such as the suspicion that the alleged killer did not act alone, and that he did not kill himself, as claimed. There have also been questions about how the young man came to be in possession of such an expensive weapon and number of bullets, as well as social media posts showing children in Kerch and other parts of occupied Crimea being shown how to use weapons, taking part in ‘Youth Army’ swearing-in ceremonies or simulations of military action.

The official version is that 18-year-old Vladislav Roslyakov, a fourth-year student at the Kerch Technical College, arrived at the college with a homemade explosive device and a hunting rifle which he used to kill 20 students and staff, before turning the gun on himself. There is video footage showing Roslyakov carrying a rifle inside the school, so his involvement does not seem in dispute.

The Crimean Human Rights Group has drawn attention to Russian media reports trying to incite enmity towards the Jehovah’s Witnesses by claiming a connection between the mass shooting



and Roslyakov's background. The allegations are based on claims, presented without any proof, that Roslyakov's mother who was bringing him up by herself was a Jehovah's Witness. Whether or not his mother is, or has ever been a Jehovah's Witness, there is no proof that Roslyakov had any religious beliefs, or that his mother's alleged beliefs affected him in any way.

As CHRГ notes, the entire 'story', as presented, for example, on the Russian state-controlled Vesti.ru, is based solely on value judgements which are presented as though they were facts.

The Vesti.ru report is entitled 'The Kerch killer was surrounded by supporters of totalitarian sects'. It claims that Roslyakov's mother was a member of what the presenter calls 'a sect' stressing (as Russian law demands) that the Jehovah's Witnesses are banned in Russia and that she "forced her son to live by the rules of the banned organization".

It then asserts that people who "have pulled themselves away from it" are sending messages of sympathy to the bereaved families and claiming that "all that happened was the result of pseudo-religious upbringing".

The supposed 'expert on religious sects', Alexander Dvorkin, makes allegations about the Jehovah's Witnesses' faith that are seriously questionable, as does the Russian Orthodox priest interviewed. None of the claims are in any way checked or analysed, nor is the viewer offered anything in the way of an alternative point of view.

The Crimean Human Rights Group is surely correct in identifying all of this as hate speech, which can result in crimes being committed against the targets of attack. The human rights activists have noted material inciting enmity towards the Jehovah's Witnesses in at least 10 Crimean or Russian Internet publications, including media fully or partially financed with Russian state funding (Vesti.ru; NTV; TV Zvezda and Russia Today)

It is, unfortunately, also possible that this could be used as a pretext for the same persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses in occupied Crimea as is now seen in Russia. This world faith which is legal in Ukraine, as in all democratic countries, was banned by Russia's Supreme Court on 20 April 2017, with the claim being made that it was 'extremist'. Not one example was provided where believers had breached public order, shown aggression or violence, or in any way threatened national security, Despite the lack of any grounds, the appeal in July 2017 was rejected, and the ruling, which drags Russia back into the religious persecution of the Soviet era, came into force.

The persecution of believers has escalated this year and there are currently at least 50 believers in Russia facing persecution, with the majority in custody or under house arrest.

As reported, the 'operations' against the Witnesses, as well as many of the features of the prosecution are very similar to the tactics used by the FSB against Crimean Muslims. These include gratuitously violent searches and arrests, highly

questionable 'secret witnesses', illicit surveillance and 'expert assessments' by individuals or a centre notorious for providing precisely those 'conclusions' that the prosecution demands.

There have been a number of administrative prosecutions in occupied Crimea, and at least one young believer has been ordered to provide 'proof of change of faith' in order to be eligible for alternative civilian service. Since Russia is violating international law by imposing military service on occupied territory, it is likely that young Jehovah's Witnesses will soon be facing imprisonment for refusing to serve in the Russian army, just as was once the case in Soviet times. Since Russia is imprisoning Crimean Muslims on charges of alleged involvement in the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement which is not banned in Ukraine, it has long been clear that the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses are legal in Ukraine would not stop Russia from persecuting them on illegally annexed Ukrainian territory. While it is to be hoped that the current hate campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses is simply a cynical attempt to find an easy 'enemy' to attack, worse under Russian occupation is near certain to come.

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## **PAKISTAN: Protests break out following Asia Bibi's acquittal. Christian schools close indefinitely in Lahore**

*Police set up roadblocks on Punjab highways as radicals protest in the province and the capital Islamabad. The authorities are monitoring the situation from a central control centre, including "red zones" in sensitive areas.*

By Kamran Chaudry

AsiaNews (31.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2PdYRrd> – This morning Pakistan's Supreme Court cleared Asia Bibi of all charges. The Christian woman spent nine years in prison for blasphemy is now free. Her acquittal has plunged the country into chaos and confusion.

Islamic radicals quickly reacted, organising demonstrations and roadblocks in the major cities. As a result, in Lahore, Church authorities ordered the indefinite closure of Christian

schools and asked parents to come and take their children home. Likewise, "Schools will remain closed till further notice," said a sign at St Peter's High School, which is run by the Diocese of Raiwind of the Church of Pakistan.

In view of the situation, the Province of Punjab invoked Section 144 of the Penal Code, which forbids public demonstrations with more than four people. The ordinance was not enough to stop extremists in the streets of the provincial capital Lahore.

Police barriers blocked Tehreek-e-Labbaik demonstrators from reaching the Provincial Assembly building. Rangers were deployed in Youhanabad, Lahore's largest Christian enclave. The first arrests took place in the city of Multan.

After Punjab, Sindh too banned public gatherings under Section 144 over "possible terrorist activities".

Local authorities set up a control room to "monitor the prevailing law and order situation" and liaise with various agencies: police, other law enforcement agencies, commissioners and their deputies.

Meanwhile, Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan blocked the Power House Chowrangi roundabout in Karachi pledging to stop the whole city.

In the federal capital Islamabad, Jamaat-i-Islami party called

on Muslims to join the protests.

The Capital Territory's deputy commissioner, Muhammad Hamza Shafqaat, twitted that "Aabpara Chowk and Faizabad are blocked", but the "Bara Kahu, Tarnol and Kashmir Highway is still open."

For their part, police set up a "red zone" around Rawal Lake.

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