

The arm-twisting between Russia and Jehovah's Witnesses goes on unabated

HRWF (06.03.2017) - The situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia has quickly escalated over the last few days and weeks. The Prosecutor General's Office has ordered an inspection of the Jehovah's Witnesses national Administrative Center, demanding that they turn over a large volume of organizational records to the Ministry of Justice by 15 February 2017. After reviewing the phrasing of the inspection order, it is clear that the government fully intends to liquidate the national headquarters due to alleged extremist activity. This came on the heels of the 9 February Supreme Court decision to uphold the liquidation of the Birobidzhan LRO (Local Religious Organization).

Since the 2 March 2016 warning, there have been thirty-five recorded instances where the police or their agents have planted banned religious literature in Kingdom Halls of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Russia.

Jehovah's Witnesses ask Kremlin for relief from pressure

AP/ Washington Post (02.03.2017) — <http://wapo.st/2mKQ69u> — The leader of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia is calling on the head of the Kremlin's human rights council to prevent what the denomination fears is an imminent total ban on the religion.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, who claim more than 170,000 faithful in Russia, have come under increasing pressure in recent years, including a ban on distributing literature deemed to violate Russia's anti-extremism laws.

In February, investigators conducted an inspection of the religion's headquarters in St. Petersburg, which could be a precursor to a ban.

"A ban on its activity in Russia would cause uneasiness throughout the world," the religion's Russian leader, Vasily Kalin, said in a letter to presidential human rights council head Mikhail Fedotov. A copy was made available to The Associated Press on Thursday.

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New wrinkle against JWs: prosecutor claims programmed literature distribution

Prosecutor's office of Krasnodar territory (03.03.2017) — <http://bit.ly/2mdiiA7> — The prosecutor's office of the city of Gelendzhik conducted an inspection to verify compliance with the legislation on combating extremist activity, in the course of which it was established that the Gelendzhik local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, in the place where they conducted their meetings on the territory of the city, stored books and brochures, including some in electronic format, that had been ruled by a court to be extremist and were included in the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

In addition, at the aforementioned address other materials were held (maps of districts of the city of Gelendzhik with indication of the delivery of literature to certain apartments, indexes with accounts of the quantity of literature distributed and witnessing ministry), providing evidence of the possession of materials with the goal of their mass distribution.

On the basis of the results of the inspection, the prosecutor of the city of Gelendzhik opened a case against the religious organization for administrative violation of law on the basis of article 20.29 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law (possession for

purposes of mass distribution of extremist materials), which was sent to the court for consideration on the merits.

By order of the Gelendzhik city court, that was left without change by decision of the Krasnodar territorial court, the Gelendzhik local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses was found guilty of committing an administrative violation of law with the assessment of a fine of 100,000 rubles and confiscation of the extremist materials.

Work on this matter will continue. (tr. by PDS, posted 3 March 2017)

Jehovah's Witnesses exonerated in Voronezh

SOVA (03.03.2017) — <http://bit.ly/2muKgIu> — On 2 March 2017, the Voronezh provincial court rescinded the order of the Lenin district court of Voronezh of 20 December 2016 suspending the activity of the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses for 45 days.

In December 2016 the organization was found guilty of possession of extremist materials for purposes of mass distribution (article 20.29 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law). On 9 October, in the worship premises of the Jehovah's Witnesses where about 650 were in attendance, forbidden literature was found in the space between a wall and a stand and also under a carpet that was nailed to the floor. Believers maintained that the literature had been planted. The provincial court took the Jehovah's Witnesses' side, considering that testimony of prosecution witnesses was contradictory and the occurrence of a violation of law was not proven.

We welcome the decision of the Voronezh provincial court and we recall that in general we consider that the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses is forbidden as extremist illegally and, consequently, prosecution of believers for its distribution is illegal. We think that such action by the authorities is religious discrimination. (tr. by PDS, posted 3 March 2017)

Source: Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, 3 March 2017

Jehovah's Witnesses appeal fines for possession of "extremist" literature in Tula

SOVA (02.03.2017) — <http://bit.ly/2mW1sE1> — In March it was learned that on 6 February 2017, the Proletariat district court of Tula held accountable on article 20.29 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law (possession of extremist materials for purposes of mass distribution) the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses and the chairman of its council, Gurama Labadze. The organization was fined 120,000 rubles and its head, 3,000 rubles. Both decisions were appealed to the Tula provincial court and consideration of the appeal was scheduled for 16 March.

The district court fined the congregation and its head because on 14 December 2016, during an inspection of the Kingdom Hall, law enforcement agencies discovered there forbidden publications "What does the Bible really teach?" and "A government that will bring Paradise." The Jehovah's Witnesses maintained that the brochures were planted in the premises and as proof they presented to the court a tape from a surveillance camera. However the court considered that neither the video nor the explanation of witnesses refuted the guilt of the religious organization and its leader for committing an administrative violation of law.

We consider that bans on the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremist and prosecution of believers for its distribution are illegal. We regard such actions by authorities as religious discrimination. (tr. by PDS, posted 2 March 2017)