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RUSSIA: JW Dennis Christensen's release blocked by the Prosecutor

HRWF (03.07.2020) – Danish Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen's early release has been halted because a prosecutor, Mr. Aleksei Shatunov, has filed to appeal the June 23 ruling allowing his liberation.

Dennis Christensen's alleged "crimes" were participating in discussions about a religious publication, helping organize worshippers to maintain the upkeep of their Kingdom Hall, and persuade people to take part on religious services.

In 2017, Russia's Supreme Court banned all Jehovah's Witnesses congregations, 395 in all, and confiscated all their properties. The ruling declared Jehovah's Witnesses Administrative Center in St Petersburg an extremist organization, and banned all the activities of the group and its members.

Dennis Christensen was the first person to be sentenced to a prison term after the ban.

It appears the prosecutor's office is using new trumped-up charges against Dennis to appeal the decision that the prosecutor's office originally supported. It will likely take weeks before a court hearing is scheduled.

Jarrold Lopes, spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, states: "This is very upsetting news for Dennis, Irina, and the millions around the world who have been following his three-year legal battle in the international media. Dennis has applied for early release four times. The prison administration has persisted in sabotaging Dennis' parole applications by falsely accusing him of misconduct. This latest move by the prosecutor's office and prison authorities is nothing short of ruthless."

Dennis has already served more than half of his six-year prison sentence. For over a year, he has been eligible for parole or a mitigation of his sentence. After submitting three applications, all of which were ignored, his fourth request finally went to court. On June 23, 2020, the Lgov District Court ordered the remaining part of his sentence to be

replaced with a fine. A prosecutor who took part in the parole hearing, Mr. Artem Kofanov, supported the mitigation of the punishment.

Two days later, another prosecutor, Mr. Aleksei Shatunov, asserted that the court ruling was illegal, demanded that it be canceled, and called for a new trial at the same court but with a different judge. Mr. Shatunov based his request on negative reports by the Lgov prison administration that claimed Dennis lacked "a favorable record of work and public life at the correctional facility."

During Dennis' June 23 parole hearing, prison representatives had attempted to make similar arguments, but the judge determined that these arguments were invalid. The defense lawyer showed the court medical documents confirming that Dennis' health limitations excluded him from physical labor in the prison. In turn, while testifying, a prison representative admitted that they had no work available that would accommodate Dennis' physical limitations.

While the prosecutor's office began seeking the appeal of Dennis' early release, prison authorities filed two reports against him. The first claimed that he was in the dining hall at the wrong time, and the second claimed that he was in the barracks in a T-shirt without a jacket. For these reasons, prison authorities placed Dennis in the EPKT for ten days. According to Russian law, authorities can only take such measures when a prisoner repeatedly commits a serious violation of prison rules, and even then, only after the prisoner receives a medical examination. Since this criteria was never met in Dennis' case, there was no basis for placing him in the EPKT.

Dennis and another prisoner share a cell measuring about three meters (10 ft) by two meters (7 ft). The room lacks proper ventilation and has mold, which further threatens Dennis' poor health. He suffered from pneumonia just a few months ago and has been diagnosed with a serious spinal cord condition. Dennis' lawyer revealed that "the administration of the penal colony is aware of this, but has placed him in conditions where he has to sleep on a hard bed, causing excruciating pain."

Dennis told his lawyer that at the time of the alleged violations, there were other prisoners with him but only he was sent to the EPKT. Brother Christensen's lawyer stated, "This leads us to believe that this was all part of a coordinated plan to prevent Dennis from being released by court order."

Interview opportunities

Dennis' lawyer, Anton Bogdanov: dbhukukcu@gmail.com; or call +7903-45-43-037

Dennis' wife, Irina: +7 920 284-92-10 (via Telegram app)

Dennis is the first of over 170 Jehovah's Witnesses who have spent time in prison or pretrial detention in modern Russia. See link to infographic.

Nationwide Persecution (Russia and Crimea)

353 under criminal investigation

35 in prison (10 convicted; 25 pretrial detention)

24 under house arrest

973 homes raided since 2017 Supreme Court ruling (176 raided in 2020—even during the COVID-19 pandemic)

Additional information: Human Rights Watch
(<https://bit.ly/3dSIzvn>) – Amnesty International
(<https://bit.ly/2D9UTe5>)

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