

# **RUSSIA: Witness ban, Russia rebuke grows**

NewsDay (02.04.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2ot4y6e> – The Kremlin threat to ban Jehovah's Witnesses from worshipping in Russia has received widespread condemnation across the world after the United States Helsinki Commission yesterday spoke out strongly against the development and called for respect of religious freedom in the vast ex-communist country.

The denunciation followed Russia's decision to criminalise religious literature, places of worship known as Kingdom Halls and criminalising the preaching work of Witnesses in over 2 300 congregations under the guise of fighting extremism.

Helsinki Commission chairman Senator Roger Wicker (MS), co-Chairman Rep Chris Smith (NJ-04), and Commissioner Rep. Richard Hudson (NC-08), in a joint statement yesterday rebuked the Russian authorities for cracking down on religious liberty.

"It is wrong to apply flawed counterterrorism laws to those who seek to practice their faith," Wicker said.

"The Russian government is exploiting genuine threats of violent extremism to undermine what little religious freedom remains in that country. This distracts from real efforts to fight terrorism. I urge the Russian government to drop the case immediately."

Smith added: "At stake in the upcoming court case is the legality and perhaps the survival of the Jehovah's Witnesses – and in fact basic religious freedom – throughout the Russian Federation. If the Supreme Court of Russia declares this faith group an extremist organisation, it is an ominous sign for all believers and marks a dark, sad day for all Russians."

The pressure was being applied as Russian authorities have approached the country's Supreme Court to effectively ban Jehovah's Witnesses in the country from worshipping claiming that they were members of an "extremist organisation".

"As a staunch supporter of religious liberty, I am appalled by the Russian government treating an entire religious group as a threat to national security. Religious affiliation should never be a justification for persecution," Hudson also said.

On March 15, the Russian Ministry of Justice filed a formal court claim to label the Administrative Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia an extremist group and liquidate their national headquarters and 395 local chapters, known as "local religious organisations".

Should the Russian Supreme Court decide against the Witnesses next week some 175 000 Witnesses in Russia could face criminal prosecution for practising their faith.

Some of the publications outlawed by Russia include My Book of Bible Stories – which teaches basic truths to people willing to know more about the Truth and have denied the importation of the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, a Bible translation published by the Witnesses.

Spokesperson for the organisation John Hunguka said Witnesses in Zimbabwe last week participated in the global letter-writing campaign against the Russian authorities' threat to ban their international brotherhood.

According to the Helsinki Final Act signed by all 57 participating states of the organisation for security and cooperation in Europe – including Russia – "participating States will recognise and respect the freedom of the individual to profess and practice, alone or in community with others, religion or belief acting in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience."

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