

# **SOUTH KOREA: Last Jehovah's Witness in prison as conscientious objector**

## **Last Jehovah's Witness in prison as conscientious objector**

JW.ORG (10.03.2020) – <https://bit.ly/35GgrZC> – After a struggle spanning nearly seven decades, Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea rejoiced over the happy events of February 28, 2019. On that day the last of their fellow believers imprisoned for conscientious objection to military service was released. Jehovah's Witnesses are grateful that South Korea's judiciary now recognizes an individual's right to conscientiously refuse military service and have the option to accept alternative civilian service.

Nearly a year later, the Supreme Court began clearing its postponed cases on conscientious objection. On February 13, 2020, the Court acquitted 108 of Jehovah's Witnesses, and on February 27, it acquitted 210 more Witnesses. It came as a surprise, though, that it found one Witness, Jin-seong Bang, guilty of evasion of military service.

Mr. Bang was not yet one of Jehovah's Witnesses when he completed basic military training in 2015 and was assigned to the Social Service Personnel (a form of alternative service). When he began a study of the Bible with Jehovah's Witnesses in 2016, he determined that he could not conscientiously continue to serve in the Social Service Personnel, since this work was supervised by the Military Manpower Administration Office. As a result of his conscientious objection, he was found guilty of evading military service by trial and appellate courts. When the Supreme Court finally decided on his case on February 27, it dismissed his appeal and allowed the guilty

verdict of the lower courts to stand. Thus, on the same day that the Supreme Court determined that refusal of military service for reasons of conscience was no longer a crime, it reasoned that Mr. Bang's refusal of military service was not based on a deep, firm, and sincere religious resolve as required by its jurisprudence.

On March 10, 2020, Mr. Bang began serving his 18-month sentence in the Seoul Detention Center. He is the only one of Jehovah's Witnesses in prison in South Korea.

### ***Implementation of Alternative Civilian Service***

As for future conscientious objectors, the legislature passed the new law on alternative civilian service in December 2019. It should be implemented in the coming months and intends to allow young Christian men who are conscientious objectors the opportunity to perform a service that can contribute to Korean society in a meaningful way. According to international standards on alternative service, it must be "civilian in nature" and not under military control or supervision. The appropriate implementation of the law will be crucial to ensure that conscientious objectors have the opportunity to perform a genuine alternative civilian service.

Furthermore, according to international standards, alternative service should not be punitive. This was highlighted in the decision by the Constitutional Court in 2018 when it stated: "If the duration or severity of alternative service is excessive to the extent that even conscientious objectors find it difficult to perform such service, this would defeat the purpose of alternative service or degrade it to a mere form of punishment."

If the law allows for control or supervision by the military, conscientious objectors who are Jehovah's Witnesses would likely feel compelled to refuse this kind of alternative service. On the other hand, if the alternative service is not

under the control and supervision of the military, every individual conscientious objector who is one of Jehovah's Witnesses will decide for himself whether to accept that service.

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## **TURKMENISTAN: Situation of Jehovah's Witnesses**

JW.ORG (01.01.2020) – Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan are not able to worship freely. Since September 2018, there has been an increase in government interference with the Witnesses' religious activity. The Witnesses experience the following violations of their basic religious freedoms:

### ***Government denial of registration***

As of December 31, 2019, nine young Witnesses were unjustly imprisoned in Turkmenistan for their conscientious objection to military service.

Turkmenistan has no provision for an alternative to military service and has taken a harsh stance towards conscientious objectors. During the reporting period, seven young Witness men were sentenced to imprisonment. Bahtiyar Atahanov was forcibly taken to a military unit and later sentenced to four years in prison. Other cases are pending with the Prosecutor's Office.

## ***Law enforcement authorities continue to mistreat Jehovah's Witnesses***

Authorities have intimidated and harassed the Witnesses by searching their homes without a warrant, seizing personal belongings, forcibly taking them from their workplace or homes for interrogation and even beating some of them—all in an effort to pressure them to abandon their faith.

## ***Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom***

### **Denial of Right to Conscientious Objection to Military Service**

Turkmenistan imprisons young Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service. The government refuses to recognize the right of conscientious objection despite calls to comply with international standards. As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses who cannot in good conscience support the military are imprisoned.

In 2015 and 2016, the U.N. Human Rights Committee (CCPR) issued ten decisions against Turkmenistan in response to applications filed by individual Witnesses who had been prosecuted and imprisoned as conscientious objectors. These decisions obligated Turkmenistan to provide alternative civilian service, Jehovah's Witnesses outside the military sphere and not under military command. In these decisions, the CCPR reprimanded Turkmenistan for prosecuting and imprisoning young Witnesses for conscientious objection in violation of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Covenant). The CCPR also concluded that prison officials tortured some of the Witnesses, as defined by

## Article 7 of the Covenant. (1)

In April 2017, the CCPR repeated its concern about Turkmenistan's "continued failure to recognize the right to conscientious objection to compulsory military service and the repeated prosecution and imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses refusing to perform compulsory military service." It called on Turkmenistan to "revise its legislation without undue delay" and to "provide for alternative service of a civilian nature outside the military sphere and not under military command for conscientious objectors, and halt all prosecutions of individuals who refuse to perform military service on grounds of conscience and release those who are currently serving prison sentences." (2)

In 2019, the CCPR issued another decision against Turkmenistan in response to a joint application filed by three Witnesses who had been prosecuted and imprisoned as conscientious objectors. The CCPR once again agreed that the Witnesses' rights had been violated when they were imprisoned and prosecuted because of their refusal to perform compulsory military service, a clear violation of Article 18 of the Covenant (3).

Presently, nine young Witness men are imprisoned as conscientious objectors in Turkmenistan. All except three are prosecuted under Article 219(1) of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan (CCT) for the 'absence of legal ground for exemption from military service.'

**(1) Mekan Annayev, 19 years old, was sentenced to two years'**

imprisonment on June 26, 2018, as a conscientious objector. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(2) Azamatyan Narkuliyev**, 18 years old, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on January 7, 2019, as a conscientious objector. He appealed to the Dänew District Court to request another medical examination because he is in poor health. The court denied his appeal, and he was severely beaten by officers of the detention center and by prison guards when he tried to file a cassation appeal. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(3) Eziz Atabayev**, 20 years old, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on December 19, 2018. On January 15, 2019, the Dashoguz Regional Court denied his appeal and left the city court's sentence unchanged. On July 17, 2019, the Supreme Court refused to consider his appeal. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(4) Saparmuradov Muhammetali**, 23 years old, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on March 19, 2019, as a conscientious objector despite his poor health. The court did not provide a copy of the decision. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(5) Bahtiyar Atahanov**, 19 years old, was sentenced to four years' imprisonment on July 15, 2019, for his conscientious objection. On April 20, he was sent to the military unit of Tejen even though he provided a statement explaining his willingness to perform alternative service. He refused to wear a military uniform and was charged under Article 344(2) of the CCT (soldier evading duty—carrying a penalty of up to seven

years' imprisonment). Appeals and a formal complaint met with no success. On August 20, 2019, the Court of Ahal denied his appeal. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(6) Azat Ashirov**, 20 years old, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on July 31, 2019, for his conscientious objection, even though he is in poor health and both his mother and one brother are disabled. He was charged under Article 219(2) of the CCT ('fraudulently evading military service'). His appeal is pending consideration. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(7) David Petrosov**, 18 years old, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on September 30, 2019, for his conscientious objection. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LBE/12.

**(8) Selim Taganov**, 18 years old, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on October 3, 2019, for his conscientious objection. He is in the Seydi Labor Camp LB-E/12.

**(9) Serdar Dovletov**, 26 years old, was sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment on November 12, 2019, for his conscientious objection, even though he suffers from a serious disease which previously enabled him to be issued draft deferments. He was sentenced under Article 219(2) of the CCT ('fraudulently evading military service'). He is in the MR/E14 Detention Center in the city of Mary.

### **Internet Censorship**

JW.ORG: The official website of Jehovah's Witnesses,

Turkmenistan.

www.jw.org is currently blocked throughout.

## ***Interference With Manifestation of Religious Belief***

### **Police Action Against Jehovah's Witnesses**

During the reporting period, there were numerous incidents of police brutality, intimidation and searches of homes of Jehovah's Witnesses. Law enforcement officers harass, interrogate and pressure the Witnesses, even threatening to 'arrange an accident' if they will not renounce their faith. Officials charge the Witnesses under Article 76(1) of the Administrative Code of Turkmenistan (ACT) for the 'production, import, export, distribution of religious literature.' The following are a few examples of police harassment:

**(1) Dashoguz.** On November 8, 2018, a local police inspector and an agent of the MNS arrived at the home of a Witness and forcibly escorted him to the local police station. The MNS agent demanded that the Witness write a statement promising that he would no longer communicate with Jehovah's Witnesses. Following this, the officer telephoned the Witness on numerous occasions, asking to meet with him. On November 18, 2018, the MNS agent went to the Witness' home and threatened to 'arrange an accident' if he refused to abandon his religious beliefs. The Witness filed a complaint with the General Prosecutor's Office of Turkmenistan and the Institute of State, Law and Democracy. On February 28, 2019, he received a response from the Prosecutor's Office of Dashoguz stating that no violations had been found.



**(2) Çärjew District, Lebap Region.** On February 8, 2019, a village official alleged that a complaint had been received and escorted a male Witness to the police station, where several law enforcement officers were waiting, including a district inspector and a criminal investigation officer. The officers interrogated the Witness and then took him to his home, searched his house and seized personal belongings. They took him back to the police station and then threatened to push a pole with the national flag attached down his throat in an attempt to force him to kiss the flag. On March 15, 2019, he was summoned to the Çärjew District Court and fined \$55 U.S. under Article 76(1) of the (ACT), and his personal computer and phone were confiscated. The Witness filed a complaint against the law enforcement officers, but he has not received a response.

**(3) Ashgabat.** On February 15, 2019, police officers detained two Witnesses while they were peacefully talking to others about their beliefs and took them to the Berkaralyk District Police Department for interrogation.

**(4) Turkmenabat, Lebap Region.** On February 18, 2019, law enforcement officers raided the home of a female Witness without a search warrant. They searched the property, seized her personal literature and passport and escorted her to the police station, where three police officers interrogated her. On March 15, 2019, a law enforcement officer entered her home through a window and forcibly took her to the Turkmenabat Court. The court fined her \$55 U.S. under Article 76(1) of the ACT. On April 16, 2019, she filed a complaint with the Turkmenabat Prosecutor's Office against the actions of the law enforcement officers. The Prosecutor's Office responded and stated that the officers had not committed an offence. On April 25, 2019, she filed a complaint with the Lebap Regional

Court. She has not received a response.

**(5) Çärjew District, Lebap Region.** On February 23, 2019, police summoned Arslan Begenchov (a conscientious objector who finished his prison term in January 2019) to the Çärjew District Police Department and questioned him about his religious beliefs. After the interrogation, the officer took Mr. Begenchov to his home, seized his electronic tablet and personal notebook and escorted him back to the police department. On May 10, 2019, the Çärjew District Court fined Mr. Begenchov \$56 U.S. under Article 76(1) of the Administrative Code of Turkmenistan. On May 20, 2019, he appealed the decision. On May 24, 2019, the Çärjew District Court responded, claiming that he had missed the filing deadline.

**(6) Ashgabat.** On March 11, 2019, an employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and another man forcibly took a male Witness from his workplace to the Kopetdag District Police Station No. 1 and reported that he was suspected of being a thief. At the station, officers questioned the Witness about his religious beliefs and seized his electronic tablet. On March 12, the Kopetdag District Court sentenced the Witness to three days' imprisonment under Article 345 of the Administrative Code of Turkmenistan (petty hooliganism). On March 15, the Witness was summoned to the Department of Religious Affairs for questioning. On April 4, 2019, he was fined \$55 U.S. by the Kopetdag District Court for distributing religious material.

**(7) Turkmenabat, Lebap Region.** On March 19, 2019, police officers detained two Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs. The officers took the women to the

police station, interrogated them and seized their electronic devices. On March 20, 2019, the Turkmenabat City Court fined each of them \$138 U.S. and ordered that their phones be confiscated. On April 9, 2019, the Lebap Regional Court upheld the decision.

**(8) Turkmenabat, Lebap Region.** On June 26, 2019, police officers raided the home of an elderly female Witness without a search warrant. They searched the property and seized her personal literature. That same day, the Witness filed a complaint with the Prosecutor's Office of Turkmenabat. The Prosecutor's Office later responded that the arguments in the complaint were not confirmed.

**(9) Baýramaly, Mary Region.** On July 6, 2019, police officers detained two Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs. The officers took the women to the police station, interrogated them, and threatened to imprison them for 15 days.

**(10) Dashoguz.** On August 8, 2019, a female Witness doctor was called to a meeting at the Regional Health Administration, along with several persons from health management. At the meeting, a police officer in attendance shouted at her, claimed that she associated with a sect, and that she carried on a propaganda campaign among the residents. The officer interrogated her, photographed her, and threatened to 'arrange an accident.'

**(11) Ashgabat.** On August 26, 2019, police summoned a female Witness to the police station. The officers interrogated her,

photographed her, searched her belongings, and seized her personal literature. That same day, police officers arrived at the home of another elderly female Witness, interrogated her about her religious beliefs and searched her home without a search warrant. On October 4, 2019, the Kopetdag District Court ordered that the women's personal literature be confiscated and imposed fines of \$57 U.S. and \$28.60 U.S. under Article 76(1) of the ACT.

**(12) Ashgabat.** On September 13, 2019, police summoned a female Witness to the police station. Police officers interrogated her about her religious beliefs and threatened her with a search and imprisonment.

**(13) Ashgabat.** On September 24, 2019, police escorted a female Witness to the police station after she spoke about her faith with a woman. At the station, the officers photographed her. On October 24, 2019, the Witness filed a complaint with the Ashgabat Prosecutor's Office against the actions of the law enforcement officers. She has not received a response.

**(14) Serdarabat District, Lebap Region.** On October 1, 2019, police officers detained the mother of a male Witness and interrogated her for three hours. The officers seized her passport, saying that they would only return it to her if her son came to police station. They also threatened to imprison her son.

**(15) Seydi, Lebap Region.** On October 2, 2019, police officers raided the home of a Witness during a peaceful religious meeting. The officers escorted a group of the Witnesses to the

police station. At the station, the officers interrogated and photographed the group. The police officers twisted the hands of the host, took him back to his house, searched his property, and seized his personal literature, his laptop, and his daughters' exercise books. The Witnesses, including the little children, were detained at the police station for six hours, from 9:00 p.m. till 3:00 a.m.

**(16) Ashgabat.** On October 24, 2019, police raided a peaceful religious meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses. The officers escorted all in attendance to the police station, interrogated them, and photographed them.

**(17) Ashgabat.** On October 28, 2019, officials detained a male Witness at a migration post at the international airport in Ashgabat because a police officer asserted that the Witness travelled to different countries for religious conventions. Without providing a search warrant, the officer demanded that the Witness give him all his electronic devices for a police search. When the Witness refused, the police officer beat him in the head. After this, officers searched the bags and flash drives of the Witness.

### ***Societal Abuses and Discrimination***

#### **Dissemination of Defamatory Material**

Between September 2018 and May 2019, unknown individuals distributed leaflets in Russian and Turkmen containing defamatory statements about the Witnesses. Not only did these leaflets include slanderous material designed to incite hatred but they also targeted individual Witnesses and included

personal data, photographs, names, birth dates and addresses. Officials have taken no action to stop these distributions.

## **Parents Pressured Not to Teach Their Religious Beliefs to Their Children**

**Balkanabat, Balkan Region.** On 5 February 2019, a Witness mother was called to the office of the principal of her daughter's school, School No. 12. In the office, a law enforcement officer criticized her religious beliefs and threatened to fine her \$832 U.S. The officer ordered the mother to stop teaching her child her religious beliefs and photographed the mother and daughter.

## ***Complaints submitted by Jehovah's Witnesses pending with the CCPR***

Begenchov v. Turkmenistan, filed June 20, 2018, on issue of conscientious objection

Hemdemov v. Turkmenistan, filed August 15, 2016, arrest and detention for "illegal" religious activities

Annamuradov et al v. Turkmenistan, filed November 29, 2018, arrests and fines for "illegal" religious activities and possessing "illegal" religious literature

## ***Positive Developments***

On February 13, 2019, 55-year-old Bahram Hemdemov was released from prison in Turkmenistan after serving his full four-year sentence in Seydi prison (LB-E/12). He is now reunited with his wife, Gulzira, and their four children. Mr. Hemdemov was

arrested on March 14, 2015, simply for holding a peaceful religious meeting at his home in a suburb of Turkmenabad, and he was convicted by the Lebap Regional Court on May 19, 2015.

During the reporting period, there were fewer incidents where police detained the Witnesses while they were talking to others about their beliefs.

### ***Meetings With Officials***

From November 2018 through March 2019, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses made several attempts to meet with representatives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ombudsman. All requests to meet remain unanswered.

In February 2019, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses met with foreign embassies.

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses were able to hold one meeting, on May 28, 2019, with an official from the religious affairs department in Ashgabat. The official declined to express an opinion and recommended approaching the Representative for Religious Issues.

Attempts by an international delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses to meet with a representative of the country's leadership were unsuccessful. All requests to meet remained unanswered.

## ***Religious Freedom Objectives***

Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan and as a worldwide organization respectfully request the government of Turkmenistan to:

(1) Release all Witness conscientious objectors who are imprisoned for their deeply held beliefs, including Bahtiyar Atahanov, who was unjustly imprisoned as a serviceman evading duty

(2) Allow an international delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses to meet with the President or members of his cabinet

(3) Recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service and provide an alternative civilian service conforming to international standards

(4) Grant full registration to Jehovah's Witnesses

(5) Stop interference with their worship and public manifestation of belief

(6) Cease threats, illegal searches of Witnesses' private homes, and seizures of personal items

(7) Allow the Witnesses to legally import Bibles and Bible-based literature and grant access to their official website, [jw.org](http://jw.org).

### ***For more information***

Please contact Jarrod Lopes at the Office of Public Information for Jehovah's Witnesses.



## **Footnotes**

1.Zafar Abdullayev v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2218/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/113/D/2218/2012.

Navruz Nasyrlayev v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2219/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2219/2012.

Mamatkarim Aminov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2220/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2220/2012.

Mahmud Hudaybergenov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2221/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/115/D/2221/2012.

Ahmet Hudaybergenov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2222/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/115/D/2222/2012.

Sunnet Japparow v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2223/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/115/D/2223/2012.

Dovran Matyakubov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2224/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2224/2012.

Akmurad Nurjanov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2225/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2225/2012.

Shandurdy Uchetov v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2226/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2226/2012.

Akmurat Yegendurdyev v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2227/2012, UN Doc. CCPR/C/117/D/2227/2012.

2.Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Turkmenistan, 20 April 2017, CCPR/C/TKM/C0/2, paras. 40, 41.

3.Nazarov et al v. Turkmenistan, Communication no. 2302/2013, UN Doc. CCPR/C/126/D/2302/2013.

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# **RUSSIA: 38 Jehovah's Witnesses in prison and more to be jailed: 248 criminal cases opened**

JW.ORG (01.09.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2q7YEqK> – Russian authorities are intensifying their attack on Jehovah's Witnesses by conducting a campaign of terror reminiscent of the Soviet era. As of August 19, 2019, there are 38 Witnesses in prison, 24 under house arrest, and 88 who are not allowed to leave their hometown. All have been charged with organizing, participating in, or financing the activity of an "extremist" organization. At least 248 Witnesses are currently under investigation, ranging in age from 20 to 85 years old.

Officials attempt to justify their actions by citing the April 2017 ban on the Witnesses' legal entities and misapplying Article 282 of the Criminal Code. In reality, they are prosecuting Jehovah's Witnesses for peaceful worship. If convicted, some of those who have been arrested face prison terms of up to ten years.

Since February 2018, law enforcement officers have followed a general pattern when arresting and detaining Jehovah's Witnesses. Heavily armed police forcibly enter Witnesses' homes, often pointing guns at the heads of the residents—including children and the elderly—and forcing them to the floor. While officers search the premises, they confiscate personal belongings and take some Witnesses into custody for further interrogation. Investigators initiate criminal charges against selected Witnesses for alleged

extremist activity and petition the courts to order their pretrial detention. Once the Witnesses are jailed, prosecutors petition the courts to extend the pretrial detentions, and the courts typically grant their requests.

On February 15, 2019, a particularly egregious incident took place in the city of Surgut, where law enforcement officers tortured seven male Witnesses after conducting searches of the homes of Witnesses in the area. The victims were stripped naked, suffocated, doused with water, beaten, and shocked with stun guns. The torture occurred on the first floor of the Russian Investigative Committee's office in Surgut. Nineteen Witnesses (including one female) are under investigation for 'organizing the activity of an extremist organization.' Three of the men who were tortured are in pretrial detention.

### **Dennis Christensen's unjust conviction upheld**

After nearly a year-long criminal trial with over 50 court appearances, Dennis Christensen, a 46-year-old Danish citizen, was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for practicing his faith as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. On February 6, 2019, Judge Aleksey Rudnev of the Zheleznodorozhniy District Court of Oryol read the verdict convicting Mr. Christensen on the false charge of 'organizing the activity of an extremist organization,' under Article 282.2(1) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. On May 23, 2019, a three-judge panel of the Oryol Regional Court denied Dennis Christensen's appeal and upheld the six-year prison sentence.

Mr. Christensen was arrested in Oryol on May 25, 2017, when

heavily armed police officers and agents of the Federal Security Services disrupted a peaceful weekly religious service of Jehovah's Witnesses that he was attending. He is jailed in Penal Colony No. 3 in the Kursk Region.

### **Continued efforts to end unjust imprisonments**

The marked increase in the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia shows that authorities intend not merely to shut down the legal entities of the Witnesses but to deny them the right to worship. Attorneys for these innocent Witnesses have so far been unsuccessful in ending the unjust imprisonments and have submitted complaints to the UN Human Rights Committee and to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) and have filed applications with the European Court of Human Rights.

In a decision adopted on April 26, 2019, the WGAD denounced Russia's systemic persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in a case involving Mr. Dmitriy Mikhailov from the city of Shuya. He was arrested and charged with "extremism" in the spring of 2018, merely for practicing his faith. The authorities placed him in pretrial detention, where he remained for 171 days. Although he is no longer jailed, Mr. Mikhailov is not allowed to leave his hometown and still faces criminal charges.

The WGAD found that Mr. Mikhailov's arrest and detention violated rights and prohibitions guaranteed by international law—the right to freedom of religion, the right to a fair trial, the prohibition on unlawful detention, and the prohibition on religious discrimination. In its conclusion,

the WGAD directed Russia to discontinue any criminal proceedings against Mr. Mikhailov and accord him just compensation.

In its decision, the WGAD noted: “[T]he actions of Mr. Mikhaylov have always been entirely peaceful, and there is no evidence that he or indeed Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia have ever been violent or incident [incite] others to violence.” The WGAD concluded that his arrest and pretrial detention was based on religious discrimination and acknowledged that his case is “only one of the now ever-growing number of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia who have been arrested, detained and charged with criminal activity on the basis of mere exercise of freedom of religion.”

“[N]umerous other such cases have been raised . . . All these cases concerned the branding of peaceful religious activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses as ‘extremist activities’ which has led to arrest and detention of individuals belonging to this religion. Therefore, although the present opinion concerns the particular circumstances of Mr. Mikhaylov, the Working Group wishes to emphasize that its findings in this opinion apply to all others in situations similar to that of Mr. Mikhaylov.”—UN Human Rights Council, Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at its 84th session: No. 11/2019, Russia, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/WGAD/2019 (April 26, 2019), par. 77.

With no ambiguity, the WGAD stressed that its findings apply to all cases involving Jehovah’s Witnesses who have been charged with “extremism.” If Russia will not respect human rights standards, Jehovah’s Witnesses hope that international tribunals will take further action to stem Russia’s attack on their religious freedom.