

RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witnesses mobilize global response to threat of ban in Russia

JW.ORG (21.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2m0jcQT> – Threatened with an imminent ban on their worship in Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses are responding with a direct appeal to Kremlin and Supreme Court officials for relief through a global letter-writing campaign. The Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses is inviting the over 8,000,000 Witnesses worldwide to participate.

On March 15, 2017, Russia's Ministry of Justice filed a claim with the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation to label the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia as extremist and liquidate it. The claim also seeks to ban the activities of the Administrative Center. If the Supreme Court upholds this claim, the Witnesses' national headquarters near St. Petersburg will be shut down. Subsequently, some 400 registered Local Religious Organizations would be liquidated, outlawing the services of over 2,300 congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. The branch property, as well as places of worship used by Witnesses throughout the country, could be seized by the State. Additionally, individual Jehovah's Witnesses would become subject to criminal prosecution for merely carrying out their worship activities. The Supreme Court is expected to rule on the claim on April 5.

"The Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses wants to heighten attention to this critical situation," states David A. Semonian, a spokesman at the Witnesses' world headquarters. "Prosecuting non-violent, law-abiding citizens as if they were terrorists is clearly a misapplication of anti-extremist laws. Such prosecution is based on completely false grounds."

The Witnesses' global campaign is not without precedent. Nearly 20 years ago, Witnesses wrote to defend their fellow worshippers in Russia in response to a smear campaign by some members of the government in power at the time. Additionally, Witnesses have initiated past letter-writing campaigns to motivate government officials to end persecution of Witnesses in other countries, including Jordan, Korea, and Malawi.

"Reading the Bible, singing, and praying with fellow worshippers is clearly not criminal," adds Mr. Semonian. "We hope that our global letter-writing campaign will motivate Russian officials to stop this unjustifiable action against our fellow worshippers."

Instructions for Letter-Writing Campaign

In order to participate in the letter-writing campaign, please use the link below to download the instructions and mailing addresses.

Download instructions.

Comments of HRWF

Jehovah's Witnesses are not engaged politically and do not pose any security threat to society. They obey the law of the land and respect authorities. At the same time, like most religious traditions there are limits to that obedience. Jehovah's Witnesses will practice civil disobedience when laws conflict with their conscience. This has resulted in harassment, fines and imprisonment in some countries.

Jehovah's Witnesses are against the use of violence. They have always refused to bear arms and to carry out military service. When the law does not provide for an alternative civilian service, they are usually sentenced to a prison term. This is still the case in Azerbaijan, Eritrea, Singapore, South Korea and Turkmenistan.

Whatever one might think of the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, the practice of their faith is clearly in accordance with international law and standards of human rights.

HRWF calls on

- **the Russian Federation not to ban Jehovah's Witnesses**
- **the readers of this newsletter to press the Russian authorities not to ban Jehovah's Witnesses by writing to the embassy of Russia in Brussels (amrusbel@skynet.be) or to the following institutions:**

* President of Russia

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin

23 Ilyinka Str., Moscow 103132, RUSSIAN FEDERATION