

## **HRWF statement at the OSCE / ODIHR: Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses and other peaceful believers**

HRWF (19.09.2019) - In our [Database of Religious Prisoners](#) covering 20 countries around the world, the Russian Federation occupies a special place with 76 prisoners of conscience whose only crime was the peaceful exercise of their religion. Russia is the only country on the European continent where peaceful believers are treated as criminals because they read their Holy Scriptures and religious books in private, because they meet for praying and worshipping at home, because they teach their children in their faith, because they share their beliefs with others.

62 Jehovah's Witnesses, 2 Mormons, 5 Said Nursi followers, 1 Tabligh Jamaat, 1 Sunni in Crimea and 5 Scientologists were behind bars in the first eight months of this year: 76 in all. A few of them were released and put under house arrest but the criminal charges are maintained.

Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen living in Russia, was sentenced to six years in a labour camp on 6 February of this year for his alleged role - denied by Christensen and Jehovah's Witnesses - in leading the local Jehovah's Witness branch in Oryol. His sentence was upheld by an appeal court three months later. He has become the first Jehovah's Witness in post-Soviet Russia to be jailed for exercising the right to freedom of religion and belief.

As of 19 August,

- 248 JWs ranging in age from 20 to 85 years old were facing criminal charges
- 38 were in detention (pretrial or prison)
- 28 were under house arrest
- 88 were not allowed to leave their hometown

Denials by the Government of the Russian Federation in response to concerns raised by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, the European Court of Human Rights and the European Union, to the effect that there is no threat to freedom of religion posed by the Supreme Court Ruling banning Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017 lack credibility. Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation are being massively arrested, detained and prosecuted because of their beliefs.

### **Recommendations**

Like all of the main independent Russian human rights organizations, some of which were brutally persecuted by the Soviet Union,

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* demands that the Russian Federation:

- put an end to the prosecution of Jehovah's Witnesses;
- release from custody all believers of all faiths charged with extremism under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code;
- overturn the Supreme Court ruling banning the 395 Jehovah's Witness congregations.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* urges:

all OSCE participating States to raise these points in their bilateral relations with the Russian Federation as long as its persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses persists.