

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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Decision expected in trial to ban Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow

MOSCOW—A decision is expected tomorrow in the drawn-out civil trial to ban Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow. After almost six years of civil proceedings, in which some 40 witnesses testified and the findings of some 30 experts were examined, Judge Vera K. Dubinskaya will hear final arguments and then is expected to rule on the civil complaint brought by the Prosecutor's Office of the Northern Administrative Circuit of Moscow.

The Prosecutor's Office has stated that banning Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow would be the first step to banning them throughout Russia. On April 13, 1999, members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe warned: "The case is a cause of concern for other religious groups who also expect to be banned if the Jehovah's Witnesses were to lose."

The prosecution makes essentially the same case it made during the trial to liquidate the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses that ended on February 23, 2001. On that date, Judge Yelena Prokhorycheva dismissed all charges filed by the Moscow Prosecutor's Office against Jehovah's Witnesses. The judge's decision stated:

The Court came to the conclusion that there is no basis whatsoever for the liquidation and banning of the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow, since it has not been established that this community in Moscow violates the Constitution of the Russian Federation or laws of the Russian Federation.

Unbowed, the City Prosecutor's Office appealed that decision on May 30, 2001. A retrial was ordered. Some legal experts who have followed these events expect that in the current trial, the court will find that nothing has changed regarding the religious activity of the more than 11,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow. If that happens, the court may again determine that there are no facts to support the charges.

In June 2003 the European Court of Human Rights submitted questions to the Russian government on the basis of a December 2001 application by Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow regarding the prosecution. Their application complained of excessive delay in the judicial proceedings and its adverse effect on their right to freedom of religion.

There are now over 133,000 active Witnesses in Russia, and last year 282,350 persons in the country attended their annual commemoration of the death of Christ.

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