

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

R u s s i a

June 16, 2004

STATEMENT

On behalf of the over 133,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, including 11,000 in the city of Moscow alone, we express our deep disappointment over today's ruling of the Moscow City (Appeals) Court to uphold a lower court decision to liquidate the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses and to ban their activity. This ruling is restricted to the city of Moscow and has no legal force outside the capital, nor does it affect the legal status of the federal Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses, registered by the Russian Ministry of Justice, and some 400 local communities of Jehovah's Witnesses registered throughout Russia. It also does not negate the Constitutional rights of Jehovah's Witnesses to freedom of speech, worship, and assembly in Moscow or elsewhere. Any attempt to limit such freedoms would constitute a misapplication of today's ruling and violate the Constitution.

We consider today's ruling to be a flagrant violation of the Moscow City Court's responsibility to protect the rights of citizens guaranteed by the Constitution. Under the guise of enforcing the 1997 Law on "Freedom of Conscience," the Court has in effect limited such freedom for 11,000 citizens of Russia and essentially paved the way for them and their children to be potential targets of illegal harassment in every sphere of life. Such a blatantly unlawful ruling is unworthy of a higher court that is to be independent, objective and impartial. Moreover the ruling sets a dangerous precedent that threatens basic freedoms of every citizen of our country.

Since the Moscow City Court was the last clear right of appeal in Russia, this case is now in the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. This Court is already in possession of our application regarding the Moscow authorities' treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses. In ten previous cases involving Austria, France, and Greece, the European Court has ruled in favor of Jehovah's Witnesses, stating that they are a "known religion" entitled to protection under the European Convention on Human Rights. Our appeal to this high court is in harmony with the example of first century Christians, who used every legal means at their disposal to protect their inalienable right to the worship of Almighty God Jehovah in obedience to his Son, Jesus Christ. (Acts 25:8-12)

The activity of Jehovah's Witnesses is legally recognized in each and every country of Europe, including the 25 member-states of the European Union as well as republics of the former Soviet Union geographically located in Europe. Rather than confirming Russia's place as an integral part of Europe, the decision of the Moscow City Court calls to mind the Soviet era, where Jehovah's Witnesses were victims of cruel persecution. The charges raised by the Prosecutor and upheld today by the Appeal Court are almost identical to the charges brought about by the repressive Soviet authority in the 1950s. The question remains whether the competent authorities will now take measures to avert a potential repetition of this persecution of citizens in our 21st century.

Sincerely,

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