

Uzbekistan

Religious Freedom Concerns

Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting, Vienna

14 and 15 April 2016

The government of Uzbekistan withholds religious freedom from Jehovah's Witnesses and local authorities frequently harass and mistreat them

- Uzbekistan has repeatedly denied Jehovah's Witnesses the right to register their congregations, and considers any religious activity of the Witnesses outside of their one registered congregation in Chirchik as illegal.
- As a consequence, authorities arrest Witnesses for attending religious meetings, mistreat them physically, and fine them for possessing religious literature or even a copy of the Bible in their home.

2016 (the first three months)	
21	Fines for possessing religious literature
>52	Convictions for religious activity
2015	
186	Fines for possessing religious literature
>239	Convictions for religious activity
100	Police raids on religious meetings and private homes
2014	
81	Police raids on religious meetings and private homes

Harassment by Police

- **Tashkent.** On **30 January 2016**, Olga Spicina and Aysultan Khaybullayeva were stopped by police while they were engaged in their peaceful religious activity and then searched their house. On February 10, the Court condemned both women to pay an administrative fine amounting to 50 times the monthly minimum salary (6,512,000 Uzbekistan soms or approximately 1,980 euros) based on article 240-1 of the Administrative Code.
- **Tashkent.** On **6 February 2016**, officers conducted a search of the home of Nina Zadorkona. As a result, she was found liable under 184-2 of the Administrative Code and was fined. Her guests Artur and Olga Golovashovs, and Sergey and Feruza Chertogovs were fined as well. Three copies of the Bible, other publications, and even the 'Mowgli' fiction book by Rudyard Kipling were taken from them as evidence.

- **Chirchik.** On **17 August 2015**, police officers came to the house of one of Jehovah's Witnesses under the pretext of a passport check and then conducted a search. During the search they seized a Bible and other two publications. According to the Decision of Chirchik City Court dated **25 August 2015**, the Witness was found liable under the article 184-2 of the Administrative Code and was fined 20 times the monthly minimum salary.
- **Denov, Surkhandarya region of Uzbekistan.** On **4 July 2015**, police officers raided and searched the houses of two Witness women. The police interrogated the women, forced them to write an explanatory note stating that they were Jehovah's Witnesses, and seized religious materials.
- **Samarkand.** On **19 June 2015**, two female Witnesses, both Uzbek nationals, were arrested on the street and taken to the police department. They were interrogated by the chief of the police department for over seven hours. A police officer gave one of the women an ultimatum—she could choose to spend 15 days in prison or have her hair forcibly cut. With scissors in hand, the officer approached her. When she said that she would file an application regarding attempted rape, the officer stopped. However, another officer grabbed her by the hair and threw her down.
- **Qarshi.** On **19 March 2015**, police officers stopped a female Witness as she returned home after a religious meeting in the town of Chirchik. Police officers confiscated some of her personal notes and a mobile device and interrogated her again the next day. A month later the police interrogated her, during which she was sexually harassed.
- **Qarshi.** On **7 March 2015**, police stopped six of Jehovah's Witnesses¹ as they returned from a religious meeting held in the town of Chirchik, the location of the only officially registered congregation in Uzbekistan. Police initiated an unwarranted search and confiscated Bibles and personal belongings, such as mobile devices and personal notes. The police interrogated all six Witnesses, and again the next day for another four hours. On **18 March 2015**, police interrogated one of the Witnesses again.

Raids on Religious Meetings

Police often raid the meetings and private homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan—in 2015, Witnesses reported 100 police raids. Listed below are some of the more recent examples.

- **Samarkand Region.** On **2 February 2016** the three women gathered in one apartment for a religious meeting. The apartment was later searched by the police officers who later demanded that the women deny their religious beliefs. The attitude of the officers was very aggressive. The women were physically abused. One of the officers slapped the face of one. When the women were taken to the police department, the officers were drunk and interrogated them in such condition. One of the officers beat one of the women and threatened her with rape. He said that he would undress her and show her to the other people. Later, according to the Samarkand City Court decision dated **15 March 2016**, the women were brought to administrative liability and fined approximately 2,100 euros each.
- **Bishkent, Kashkadaryo Region.** A male Jehovah's Witness was found guilty under article 184-2 of the Administrative Code after the police officers seized a Bible from his apartment. According to the Karshi District Court decision dated **17 September 2015**, he was detained in jail for 15 days. From 17 September until 2 October 2015, he faced threatening behaviour at the hands of the police officers. One of the officers said that if this Witness was arrested again, he will be physically harmed in the police department. One of

¹ Names withheld

the officers threatened the Witness with criminal charges in case of his next arrest related to his religious activity. He was also threatened with physical harm if he files a complaint with international organizations.

- **Takhiatash, Karakalpakstan.** On **2 July 2015**, about 40 of Jehovah’s Witnesses gathered for a religious meeting in a private home. During the meeting, police officers raided the home and conducted a search. They seized the homeowner’s computer and the religious literature and electronic devices of the attendees.

On **16 July 2015**, a local court charged the Witnesses with administrative violations of illegal missionary activity and illegal possession of religious literature.

- **Samarkand.** On **1 May 2015**, police raided a private home where eight of Jehovah’s Witnesses were meeting for worship. They were threatened, interrogated, and battered. Officials planted drugs on one of the male Witnesses and severely beat two Witnesses—a man and a woman. Two of the women were sexually harassed, both physically and verbally. Police brought the Witnesses to the Pastdargom District Department of the Samarkand Region at 7:00 pm on 1 May and interrogated them until 8:00 am on 2 May. Major Rustam Rakhmatov, one of the officials who conducted the interrogation, was intoxicated. The police seized the Witnesses’ personal religious literature and belongings, such as smartphones and tablets, and never returned them.

On **22 June 2015**, the District Pastdargom Court of the Samarkand region found the six of the eight Witnesses guilty of the administrative offense of “illegal possession and storage of religious literature.” Fines varied from 202 euros to nearly 440 euros. Authorities also initiated a criminal case against one Witness under the criminal charge of “illegal production, purchase, storage, carriage or traffic in narcotics.” Officers told the women they had abused that if the women filed any claims of sexual harassment, the police would charge them with giving false evidence.

- **Samarkand.** On **16 April 2015**, six of Jehovah’s Witnesses and two small children gathered in a home for a religious meeting. During the meeting, the police raided the home and confiscated personal religious literature and personal belongings, such as mobile devices. Police detained the Witnesses for hours at the Samarkand Region Department of Internal Affairs. According to the Okdaryo District Court decision dated **3 June 2015**, one of the Witnesses was brought to administrative liability and fined for the “illegal possession and storage of religious literature.” The amount of the fine is approximately 2,200 euros. The other five Witnesses were found guilty under the same charges and were fined approximately 1,800 euros.

Legal Registration Denied Outside of Chirchik

Only one congregation in the entire country—located in the town of Chirchik—has registration. Jehovah’s Witnesses have not been granted registration in any other region of the country. As a result, all religious literature found outside of the Kingdom Hall in Chirchik is labelled “banned,” and religious meetings in private homes held both inside and outside of Chirchik are deemed unlawful. Authorities have rejected the Witnesses’ repeated efforts to register in Tashkent.

Criminalization of Religious Activity

In its fourth periodic report on Uzbekistan, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern that “the legal provisions prohibiting proselytism and other missionary activities continue to be in force.” It also expressed concern about reports of “arrest for ‘illegal religious

activity', detention, fines and prison sentences for Christians and members of other minority religions conducting peaceful religious activities outside registered structures; [and] censorship of religious materials and restrictions on their use only inside buildings of registered religious groups."

The Committee called on Uzbekistan to guarantee freedom of conscience and religious belief and the right of peaceful assembly. It stated that Uzbekistan should decriminalise "proselytism and other missionary activities, and investigate all acts of interference with the freedom of religion of independent Muslims, Christians and other minority religions practising their religion outside registered structures."—CCPR/C/UZB/4, adopted 20 July 2015, paras. 22, 24.

Thirty-seven of Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and convicted for "illegal" religious activity and recently filed a joint complaint with the **Prosecutor General's Office**. The complaint requests that the Prosecutor General protest the cases to the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan. The Prosecutor General referred each individual case to the district prosecutors who in turn rejected the complaints. As expressed by Jehovah's Witnesses to the Committee for Religious Affairs during a meeting held on 28 March 2016, Jehovah's Witnesses would be pleased to resolve this issue domestically before their application reaches the **UN Human Rights Committee**.

State Censorship of Religious Literature

Following a meeting with the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) on 6 April 2015, authorities indicated that Witnesses could possess some religious literature but solely for their personal use. However, when police raid the homes of Witnesses, they seize any religious literature they find and send it to the CRA, which labels the literature "banned" and issues fines to the individuals possessing the literature.

Shockingly, the possession of a copy of the Bible at home is considered as an offence, even in Chirchik where a small community of Jehovah's Witnesses is registered.

- **Chirchik. On September 16, 2015**, police officers conducted the search of the house of Tozhigul Alimkulova. They confiscated a copy of the Bible in Russian and a copy in Kazakh. The Court of Appeal condemned her on November 9, 2015, to pay an administrative fine amounting to 20 times the monthly minimum salary (2,604,800 Uzbekistan soms or approximately 800 euros) simply for possessing these two bibles at home.
- **Chirchik. On August 11, 2015**, police officers conducted the search of the house of Gulchekhra Bekmuratova. They seized a Bible along with photocopies of other publications. She was condemned on October 5, 2015, to pay an administrative fine of 2,368,000 Uzbekistan soms or 720 euros.
- **Chirchik, On August 17, 2015**, police officers raided the house of Gulistan Kurbanbayeva. The Court condemned her to pay a fine of 2,368,000 Uzbekistan soms (720 euros) for possessing a Bible along with other publications that were seized during the search.

Tens of similar raids have been conducted throughout the country with a similar outcome. In view of the above, during the week of **21 March 2016**, an application was filed with the **Constitutional Court** concerning Article 184 of the Code of Administrative Violations, which criminalizes public distribution of religious literature, but not possession. Logically, Jehovah's Witnesses should not be fined for possessing a piece of literature, particularly the Bible. This

however repeatedly occurs as illustrated above. It is hoped that the Constitutional Court hears this case and agrees that Article 184 does not apply to the possession of religious literature which could result in a significant reduction in arrests.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

- **Taxiatosh, Karakalpakstan.** On **28 July 2015**, a group of Jehovah's Witnesses gathered together with the sons of a deceased Witness and other relatives. The funeral ceremony was abruptly interrupted by a visit from the police captain, Ruslan Allanazarov; a police officer, Mr. Ondasyn; representatives of the local condominium; and mullah Mr. Tajimurat Orazov.

Representatives of the local condominium and mullah Mr. Tajimurat Orazov were "welcoming" the neighbours, thus preventing them from entering the house of the deceased to offer condolences. The neighbours observed that a camera had been installed across the street from the house. Anyone found entering the house would later be fined nearly 350 euros each.

The family of the deceased provided Captain Allanazarov with a letter from the CRA confirming that the CRA had no objection to the funeral arrangements. However, the captain said that regardless of the CRA opinion, the Witnesses should not bury their dead in the Muslim cemetery. After some time, special police squad cars accompanied the attendees to the cemetery, where police officers instructed the family where they should bury the deceased.

- **Samarkand.** On **12 March 2015** a defamatory article was published in the *Bekazhon* newspaper in Samarkand, which has a circulation of 50,000. The article contained numerous misconceptions about the Witnesses and made a number of outrageous and slanderous statements. The Witnesses demanded a retraction addressing the most outrageous false statements. To date no retraction has been published.
- On **6 January 2015**, the 12news.uz news agency published an article by Mr. Roman Seleznev with the headline "When Will the Attacks of Jehovah's Witnesses End?" The article was defamatory and contained false information, insulting and slandering Jehovah's Witnesses and inciting religious hatred. Jehovah's Witnesses demanded a retraction from the news agency, but to date no retraction has been published.

Positive Developments

Over the years there has been some improvement in the attitude of the government of Uzbekistan towards Jehovah's Witnesses.

- On **March 23, 2016**, with the assistance of the CRA, Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Uzbekistan held their annual observance of the Memorial of Christ's death without hindrance. Local government officials and representatives of the CRA attended the event in Chirchik. This is the fourth year that this sacred event has been held throughout the country without major incident.
- None of Jehovah's Witnesses are currently detained for conscientious objection to military service. In response to the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee, the government of Uzbekistan stated: "According to the Law on Military Obligations and Military Service dated 12 December 2002, citizens between 18 and 27 who are enrolled in the military-register and liable for conscription have the right to alternative service if they are part of a registered religious organisation whose beliefs do not permit carrying

weapons or serving in the Armed Forces. In Uzbekistan such religious organisations include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Evangelical Christian Baptists, and Seventh-Day Adventists.”

Meetings With Officials

On **March 28, 2016**, the CRA Chairman, Artikbek Yusupov, met with representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses to discuss their situation in Uzbekistan and the need to allow further registration of their congregations, beginning with the congregation in Tashkent.

Jehovah’s Witnesses respectfully request the government of Uzbekistan to:

- (1) Grant registration to the local community of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Tashkent and in other cities of Uzbekistan
- (2) Stop illegal searches of private homes and seizures of religious literature
- (3) Stop harassing and molesting Jehovah’s Witnesses
- (4) Stop arrests and prosecutions for attending religious meetings and for peacefully and respectfully sharing one’s belief with others
- (5) Allow religious literature without censorship and access to the international website of Jehovah’s Witnesses, jw.org
- (6) Uphold the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the constitution of Uzbekistan and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue with representatives of the Uzbekistan government.

For more information:

Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah’s Witnesses at generalcounsel@jw.org.

Visit the Newsroom at jw.org or scan the QR code below to learn about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah’s Witnesses in Uzbekistan.

