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Russia: Misuse of the law against extremism

Russia has adopted a law against extremism that is misused to target minority religious faiths. The interpretation of the law against extremism goes so far that it restricts freedom of expression and access to information, freedom of assembly and of worship, freedom of religion or belief in general.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Nursi readers are particular targets of "extremism"-related criminal prosecutions, as works they frequently read or use during their religious meetings have been banned by various courts. They have been placed on Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials maintained by the Justice Ministry. Anyone distributing works from this official black list or storing them with the intention of distributing them is liable to criminal prosecution.

Last but not least, in a new development, prosecutors in Tomsk are seeking through the courts to have the Russian translation of the most important work for Hare Krishna devotees - The Bhagavad-Gita by Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness - declared "extremist" and placed on the Federal List.

Meanwhile raids continue, including coordinated raids on 25 August on at least 19 homes of members of the Jehovah's Witness community in Taganrog.

On 7 September 2011, three local Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested without charges in the Chuvash Republic. Farid Mannafov, Oleg Marchenko, and Aleksey Nikolayev were escorted by the police to an undisclosed location. Their relatives did not find out until the following day that the three were being kept in custody at a temporary detention center. They spent two days in

custody. Searches were conducted in the homes of these and other Witness families. Bibles, computers, legal documents, and personal valuables were confiscated. Some searches were carried out for more than six hours.

Also on 7 September, some of the religious services of Jehovah's Witnesses were disrupted in the Chuvash Republic. In what appears to be a coordinated attack on the Witnesses there, police officers intruded into the Witnesses' places of worship (known as Kingdom Halls) and other premises used by the Witnesses in the cities of Cheboksary, Novocheboksarsk and Kanash. In addition to disrupting the peaceful religious services being held by the Witnesses, those present were searched, forcibly taken to a police station, and fingerprinted against their will. Senior police officers took part in the raids.

Human Rights Without Frontiers recommends to the Russian authorities

- To put a moratorium on the implementation of the 2002 **Law On Fighting Extremist Activity** as it is used and abused to restrict religious freedom, to repress and attempt to ban non-violent religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Said Nursi readers;
- To revise Article 14 of the 1997 **Law on Freedom of conscience and association** which deals with the banning of the activities of Religious Organizations and their liquidation as several of its provisions are not necessary in a democratic society;
- To establish clear guidelines for the implementation of Article 282 of the Criminal Code (incitement of national, racial or religious enmity) so as to stop the misuse of it in restricting the legitimate activities of religious communities (e.g. teaching the superiority of their doctrine over those of other religions);
- To reconsider cases against individuals and organizations which have been accused of extremism for conducting normal religious activities protected under international norms and laws;
- To put an end to the harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses and Said Nursi's readers (innumerable check ups, banning of their religious literature, accusations of extremism and religious enmity);
- To dissolve the Expert Council for Conducting State-Religious Studies put in place under the Ministry of Justice as its powers have been unduly extended to limit the freedom of "non-traditional" religious movements and its members include activists of the Orthodox Church and anti-sect movements;
- To fully implement the decisions of the European Court.

