

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Russian Federation: Effectively investigate allegations of torture against and persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

All reports of torture and other ill-treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses targeted by law enforcement officials during and following the 15 February 2019 searches of at least 20 of their homes in Surgut, Khanty-Mansiisk Autonomous Region-Yugra, should be promptly, effectively and impartially investigated, and all responsible brought to justice. Further, criminal proceedings against Jehovah's Witnesses in Surgut on the basis of the April 2017 ruling of the Russian Supreme Court which bans the group in Russia and equates it to an extremist organization – and proceedings against Jehovah's Witnesses in other parts of Russia – should be terminated. Those in custody should be immediately and unconditionally released, and all harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia must cease.

Amnesty International has interviewed several individuals who claim they were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment when they were in custody of law enforcement officials following the 15 February raids of their houses. We have also examined written testimonies given to a lawyer and both oral and written statements are compelling, mutually consistent and credible. They strongly indicate that torture and other ill-treatment did take place during or in-between interrogations of the Surgut office of the Investigation Committee in Ostrovskogo street, 47.

According to information available to Amnesty International, in the morning of 15 February after the house raids at least 40 people, including women and minors, were arrested and brought to the Investigation Committee in Surgut. There, FSB operatives and other security officials punched, kicked, suffocated and electrocuted with stun guns at least seven Jehovah's Witnesses to extract "confessions" of participation in an "extremist organization". Some victims reported threats of rape. According to victims and eyewitnesses, the screams of those subjected to ill-treatment were heard throughout the building. None of the officials and other visitors present (including, likely, state lawyers who had been called in to represent the victims) protested or tried to halt these activities.

One Jehovah Witness we interviewed stated that as his home was searched he was beaten and threatened with torture, intimidated during his interrogation and afterwards ill-treated. He also recounted procedural violations including denial of access to a lawyer of his choice.

The initial response of the Russian authorities to the above was a blank and

unsubstantiated denial. Amnesty International welcomes the decision by the Russian Investigation Committee to conduct a preliminary investigation into the reports, calls on the Russian authorities to follow it with a full, impartial and effective official investigation and bring those responsible to justice.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses – 57-year-old Sergei Loginov, 52-year-old Artur Severinchik and 42-year-old Yevgeniy Fedin – are detained on remand. In custody they remain at risk of torture and other ill-treatment. As these individuals are detained solely in connection with their religious beliefs Amnesty International believes they are prisoners of conscience. They must be released immediately and unconditionally and criminal proceedings against them and other Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia must stop immediately. The Russian authorities must respect, protect, promote and fulfil the right to freedom of religion as enshrined in the country's Constitution and human rights treaties to which Russia is a state party.