

URGENT ACTION

PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE MUST BE RELEASED

On 23 June, Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen will have a parole hearing at the Lgov District Court, in western Russia. Dennis Christensen, a Danish national living in Russia, was arrested in 2017 and prosecuted for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of religion. If the parole is not granted, he will be imprisoned until May 2022. He is a prisoner of conscience persecuted solely for his faith and must be released immediately and unconditionally.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

*Prosecutor of Kursk Region
Aleksey Nikolaevich Tsukanov
Prosecutor's Office of Kursk Region
Ul. Lenina, 21
Kursk, 305000
Russian Federation
Email: kurskobl@mail.ru*

Dear Prosecutor of Kursk Region,

*I am writing to urge you to support the release on parole of **Dennis Christensen**, a Danish citizen and a Jehovah's Witness serving his sentence at penal colony IK-3 in Kursk Region. On 23 June, the Lgov District Court will hear his parole application.*

Dennis Christensen has been convicted for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of religion and practicing his faith as a Jehovah's Witness. He is a prisoner of conscience and must be released immediately and unconditionally. Dennis Christensen's health has deteriorated during his imprisonment and he has not fully recovered from a pneumonia he contracted at the end of 2019. His health condition makes him especially vulnerable to COVID-19.

In April, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights urged states to release political prisoners and those who might be especially at risk of contracting COVID-19.

In the light of the above information, I urge you to use the opportunity of Dennis Christensen's parole application and take all necessary steps within your authority to facilitate his prompt release.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Jehovah's Witnesses have faced persecution and harassment in modern Russia since 2009, when a court in Rostov Region in southern Russia banned the local Jehovah's Witnesses' organization and declared 34 of their publications "extremist". In subsequent years, several Jehovah's Witnesses' groups across Russia were pronounced "extremist" by local courts. Their prosecution was based on the vague definition of "extremism" in Russian law, in line with the growing practice of its vague application which increasingly targeted political, but also religious and other forms of dissent. In April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court ruled that the central Jehovah's Witnesses organization in Russia should be closed, its activities stopped, and its property confiscated. This effectively banned all local groups. Since then, any activity on behalf of a local Jehovah's Witnesses group has been regarded as criminal.

Dennis Christensen – a Danish national who has been living in Russia for over 20 years – was arrested a month after the Supreme Court's decision in 2017, becoming the first Jehovah's Witness to be detained in Russia following the ban. On 6 February 2019, the Zheleznodorzhnyi District Court in Orel found Dennis Christensen guilty of "organizing activities of an extremist organization" (Article 282.2 (1) of the Russian Criminal Code) and sentenced him to six years in prison. According to the prosecution, Dennis Christensen was organizing local worship by Jehovah's Witnesses, and as evidence of his "crime" he was collecting donations and organizing cleaning of the venue used by the worshipers. On 23 May, the Orel Regional Court upheld the sentence and he was then transported to the correctional penal colony No 3 in Kursk region, some 200 km away from his home in Orel.

There, Dennis Christensen has reportedly faced harassment by the penal colony administration, including via unsubstantiated reprimands for alleged regime violations. His previous applications for parole or easing of the regime have been rejected. Although Dennis has not fully recovered from a pneumonia he suffered at the end of 2019, the prison administration is not providing him with the adequate medical care he requires and has reportedly "lost" his medical file.

In June 2017, Dennis Christensen filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights against his arrest. Subsequently, the Kingdom of Denmark joined Christensen v. Russia as the third party. The complaint is known to have passed the communication stage.

According to the data provided by the Jehovah's Witnesses organization, since Dennis Christensen's conviction, the reprisals against its members in Russia have intensified. As of 9 June, criminal proceedings have been opened against at least 346 Jehovah's Witnesses under "extremism" charges, and at least 170 individuals have spent time in pre-trial detention. Ten people have been convicted. At least 20 people were remanded in custody as of 9 June, and 22 individuals were under house arrest. At least 927 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses have been raided since the 2017 Supreme Court ruling, including 126 homes raided in 2020 – even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amnesty International considers the Russian authorities' decision to criminalise Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings and practices an arbitrary and discriminatory measure, and a violation of the right to freedom of religion. The organization has called on the authorities to quash these decisions. It has also consistently stressed that anti-extremism legislation in Russia is often applied arbitrarily and has called on the authorities to review the relevant legislation and practice and bring them in line with international standards. Amnesty International considers Dennis Christensen and any Jehovah's Witness deprived of their liberty solely in connection with the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion to be prisoners of conscience. They must be immediately and unconditionally released, all convictions quashed and all pending charges against them dropped.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Russian, English.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 28 July 2020

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Dennis Christensen (he/him)