

URGENT ACTION

DANISH JEHOVAH'S WITNESS JAILED FOR HIS FAITH

Danish national and Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen was found guilty on 6 February of "organizing activities of an extremist organization" and sentenced to six years imprisonment by a court in Orel, western Russia. He is a prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of religion. He must be immediately and unconditionally released, and his conviction must be quashed.

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

*Prosecutor of Orel Region
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Dear Prosecutor,

I am writing to express my grave concern about the criminal conviction of Danish national and Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen.

On 6 February, Zheleznodorznyi 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' imprisonment.

Dennis Christensen has been arrested and prosecuted for practicing his religion as Jehovah's Witness. The right to freedom of religion is enshrined both in the Russian Constitution and in international human rights treaties to which Russia is a state party. By prosecuting Dennis Christensen, as well as other Jehovah's Witnesses, Russia violates its human rights obligations.

Dennis Christensen is a prisoner of conscience, deprived of his liberty solely for exercising his right to freedom of religion. I urge you to ensure he is released immediately and unconditionally and his conviction quashed.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Jehovah's Witnesses have faced persecution and harassment in Russia since 2009, when a court in Rostov Region in southern Russia banned the local Jehovah's Witnesses' (JW) organization and declared 34 of JW's publications "extremist". In subsequent years, several Jehovah's Witnesses' groups across Russia were pronounced "extremist" by local courts. The relevant decisions relied on the vague definition of "extremism" in Russian law, and were consistent 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 was arrested a month after the Supreme Court's decision, becoming the first Jehovah's Witness to be detained in Russia following the ban, with several other followers of the faith arrested since. According to the prosecution, he was organizing local worship. Him making respective announcements, collecting donations and organizing cleaning of the venue used by the worshipers, was cited as evidence of his "crime".

Amnesty International regards the Russian authorities' decision to criminalise JW's 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 or English.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 18 June 2019

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/his)