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RUSSIA: Contrasting situations of Moscow Jehovah's Witnesses and Salvation Army

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>), and Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service that they are experiencing "escalating and more overt" obstruction as a result of the local court ban on their activities in Moscow. They state that they have experienced police harassment in their door-to-door preaching, lost meeting places and "those who still provide them are becoming fearful of the consequences". In contrast, the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army - which also faced local court moves to ban their activities in Moscow - has told Forum 18 that its problems are now resolved. "We work calmly in the city without problems and can rent property freely. We are now simply waiting patiently for the re-registration documentation to come through," the Salvation Army told Forum 18. Jehovah's Witnesses have lodged an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights, which separately decided in June 2004 to hear a May 2001 complaint from the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army.

Jehovah's Witnesses are now experiencing "escalating and more overt" obstruction as a result of last year's local court ban on their activities in Moscow, their representative Christian Presber told Forum 18 News Service on 20 June. They have lost meeting places, he complained, while "those who still provide them are becoming fearful of the consequences". The Jehovah's Witnesses report that 44 of their 92 congregations in Moscow currently have to share the organisation's complex of five Kingdom Halls because of the difficulties in renting premises. "Religious services are being held seven days a week with only 30 minutes separating the end of one religious service and the starting of another." A further 31 meet in small home groups, while the remaining 17 meet wherever they can find accommodation outside the city, "at times even in the open forest".

Jehovah's Witnesses also complain that police have harassed those engaging in door-to-door preaching. In January, police warned two Jehovah's Witnesses that if they continued such preaching, charges would be brought against them for "fraudulent activities". In one recent case, on 14 April Andrei Sazhin and Vladimir Titov were detained in a police cell for over an hour. The two say that one officer explained that Russians "should go to the Orthodox Church" whereas Jehovah's Witnesses were "an American religion".

By contrast, the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army - which faced attempts to liquidate it through the courts in 2000-2, which prevented it from re-registering, and was described in a July 2000 Moscow district court decision as a "militarised organisation" (see F18News 4 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=555) - says its problems are now resolved. "We work calmly in the city without problems and can rent property freely," spokesperson Galina Drozdovskaya told Forum 18 from Moscow on 22 June. "We are now simply waiting patiently for the re-registration documentation to come through."

Konstantin Blazhenov of Moscow city's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, downplayed the Jehovah's Witness concerns over rental obstructions and police detention of door-to-door preachers in the city. He told Forum 18 in Moscow on 20 June that he had met a Jehovah's Witness representative the previous week, but had received no complaints about obstruction. Asked about the rental problems, he said the Jehovah's Witnesses were planning to hold a congress in Moscow for which their centralised religious organisation is able to rent premises.

Regarding police detentions of Jehovah's Witnesses while preaching, he pointed out that many Moscow residents were concerned about security and would summon the police if they saw strangers calling door to door: "the police will naturally detain them for questioning." He also stressed that the court ban affected only the activity of the Moscow organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses, whereas "as individuals they can do anything they like as long as it is within the law". Blazhenov pointed out, however, that while any person has the right to call door to door, "it is quite another matter how they will be received".

The ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses' activity in Moscow followed conviction under Russia's 1997 religion law on charges of destroying families, violating parents' equal rights in bringing up their children, violating the Constitution and freedom of conscience, encouraging suicide and inciting citizens to refuse both military and alternative service (see F18News 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=289).

Last year's ban led to immediate cancellation of rental contracts in a number of Moscow locations (see F18News 13 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=297), a process that has continued. However, Presber told Forum 18 in early 2005

that rental disagreements at one Moscow building had been resolved and that worship conventions held had been largely unobstructed with detentions in only "a few isolated cases." Various agencies of Moscow city – including the Culture Committee and the Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations – have instructed premises not to rent to the Jehovah's Witnesses since the ban.

Although the ban relates solely to Moscow, the authorities in other parts of Russia have also acted against the Jehovah's Witnesses. Rental contracts were cancelled in Khabarovsk, St Petersburg, Vladimir and Yekaterinburg (see F18News 7 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=377). Forum 18 also found that the ban was cited as grounds for dismissing three Jehovah's Witnesses from their jobs on the Pacific island of Sakhalin (see F18News 4 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=312).

Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Presber complains that this trend is growing. "We are now starting to experience problems in areas where there were none previously," he told Forum 18. He added that it is difficult to determine whether regional authorities seeking to obstruct local communities are those already opposed to their activity. "Some might simply be trying to follow the rule of law."

Also, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that they have been obstructed from door-to-door preaching in St Petersburg, while a rental agreement was curtailed under pressure from village authorities outside St Petersburg, and a public prosecutor's office launched an investigation into the local congregation at the request of a local Orthodox priest in Ukhta in the northern Komi Republic. Authorities also reportedly instigated investigations into the activity of unregistered Jehovah's Witness communities in Orel and Khanty-Mansiisk regions. By May, the Jehovah's Witnesses report, 20 congregations in various Russian regions "had received letters from their local Federal Registration Service Departments informing them that their chartered activity would be audited. Five are being investigated by the police, one by the prosecutor's office, while a further eight have received inquiries from various city administrations about their religious activity." In all, the Jehovah's Witnesses have 398 registered communities in 72 Russian regions.

In the wake of the ban, the Jehovah's Witnesses lodged a challenge to the Moscow decision at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) on the basis of repeated prosecution for the same events. But Presber told Forum 18 that there have been no recent developments in the ECtHR case. The ECtHR decided in June 2004 that it would hear a May 2001 complaint from the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army, about the city authorities' then refusal of its application for re-registration as a legal entity.

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russ>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY