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Russian court bans religious activities of Jehovah's Witnesses from Moscow

By Anneli Nerman



Canadian Press

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MOSCOW

A Moscow court has banned the religious activities of Jehovah's Witnesses from the Russian capital in a move that critics called a step back for democracy and religious freedom.

Prosecutors claimed the religion destroys families and fosters hatred. Moscow's Golovinsky district court on Friday granted their request that it be outlawed in the capital under a provision that allows courts to ban religious groups believed to incite hatred or intolerant behaviour.

John Burns, a Canadian lawyer for the group, pledged to appeal the decision to higher Russian courts and to pursue it in the European Court of Human Rights.

"Religious minorities are often a litmus test for where a society is going ... this is an ominous signal," Burns said.

Defence lawyer Galina Krylova argued that the decision has no legal foundation, as the prosecutor simply cited the denomination's religious literature.


"The activities of Jehovah's Witnesses weren't the subject of the court trial ... the subject was the religious beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses ... doctrinal arguments," Krylova said.

Among Jehovah's Witnesses doctrine is a prohibition against blood transfusions, based on an interpretation of the Bible, and an obligation to share their Christian faith with others.

The U.S. State Department also criticized the Russian court decision.

"We deplore the recent decision ... to ban the religious activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow and to liquidate their legal entity," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Friday in Washington.

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"We urge local authorities and the Russian government to honour their commitments to respect the right of all faiths to religious freedom," he added.

The Moscow group has been fighting for survival since 1998, when proceedings were first launched to shut them down. In 2001, a local court threw out prosecutors' attempts to ban the group in a ruling hailed as a sign of increased religious tolerance.

But another court later ordered a new hearing in the case and the second trial began in the Golovinsky court in the spring of 2002.

The ongoing legal battle and a refusal by justice authorities to re-register the group as required by a 1997 law already have hampered the activities of the capital's estimated 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses.

"Hearing today's verdict, I think we returned to the Soviet Union of 50 years ago," said Vasilii Kalin. In 1951, at age four, Kalin was sent into exile in Siberia with his family and another 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to renounce their faith during Stalin's state-atheism campaign.

Russia's 1997 religion law enshrines Orthodox Christianity as the country's predominant religion and pledges respect for Buddhism, Islam and Judaism, but places restrictions on other groups.

Christian Presber, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, said Saturday the denomination has more than 133,000 members nationwide. He expressed concern about the ramifications of the court's decision for communities outside Moscow.

"We anticipate it's going to unleash a whole plethora of new attempts by local and regional authorities to impede our activities," Presber said.

Also Friday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he favoured drafting a bill on state support "to the spiritual leaders of traditional religious confessions," the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

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