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Explosives Seized From Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Investigators Claim

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Authorities in central Russia said they have seized explosives from a group of Jehovah's Witnesses detained in a year-long crackdown on the religious group that Moscow labels as extremist.

After long encountering difficulties in Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses were outlawed in the country as an extremist organization in 2017. Rights groups have condemned law enforcement officials over raids and arrests against the group that they say violate their religious freedom.

Related article: Jehovah's Witnesses Added to Russia's Extremism Registry

Five Jehovah's Witnesses were detained in the Volga region of Kirov on charges of organizing and financing extremist activities, investigators said Tuesday.

“A large amount of extremist literature, electronic data carriers, as well as two grenades and a landmine were seized during searches,” the regional Investigative Committee said in a statement.

The suspects were accused of organizing secret meetings between August 2017 and September 2018 and collecting 500,000 rubles ($7,500) in donations.

A Latvian-based member of the European Association of Jehovah’s Christian Witnesses told Agence France Presse this was the first case of its members being found in possession of weapons in Russia.

“It is both funny and strange. Why mines?” Yaroslav Sivulskiy was quoted as saying Wednesday.

Sivulskiy estimated that 25 Jehovah’s Witnesses were currently being held in pre-trial detention in Russia. A Polish citizen residing in Russia was apprehended in the Kirov raid, the SOVA Center NGO said.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are a Christian religious group with roughly 8.2 million members worldwide. Their faith differs notably from mainstream Christianity in several ways, with many members believing that armageddon is imminent.

Editors note: In written comments, Jehovah's Witnesses' spokesperson Jarrod Lopes said that the explosives seized in the raid were World War II relics that belonged to the husband of a Jehovah's Witness who is not a member of the group himself.

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