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Authorities Raid Russian Jehovah's Witnesses

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A sign outside a Russian Jehovah's Witness centre before the 2017 ban. **Alexander Demianchuk/TASS**

Authorities raided homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in northern Russia as part of a criminal probe into extremism against the banned religious organization, investigators said in a statement Monday.

Russia banned the Christian denomination known for door-to-door preaching, close Bible study and rejection of military service and blood transfusions in 2017. Rights groups have condemned the crackdown against the Jehovah's Witnesses as a violation of religious freedom.

Investigators in the city of Murmansk accused worshippers of "knowingly conducting the activities of the religious organization from April 2017 to the present time."

The believers "held meetings, personally delivered sermons, distributed religious literature and involved new people in the activities of an extremist organization," they said in an online statement.

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The investigators identified the alleged perpetrators but did not appear to have detained anyone.

“It’s unclear who the case is initiated against,” the U.S.-based Jehovah’s Witnesses organization said on its website.

Two Murmansk-based worshippers were earlier this year indicted as part of a separate extremism case that was launched in 2018.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses group estimates that it has about 170,000 followers in Russia.

The 2017 ban forced almost 400 branches across Russia to shut down and at least 5,000 worshippers to flee the country, Time magazine reported recently.

At least 15 out of 280 Jehovah’s Witnesses on trial have been convicted in Russia. These include Danish citizen Dennis Christensen and Russian nationals Sergei Klimov and Vladimir Alushkin, who are each serving six-year sentences.

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