The Moscow Times
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Russia ‘Escalating’ Jehovah’s Witnesses Crackdown – HRW

January 10, 2020



More than half of law enforcement raids against Jehovah's Witnesses have taken place in the past 12 months, the group says. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

Russian authorities have ramped up the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the country in the past 12 months, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Thursday.

The religious group estimates that 313 people have been charged or convicted since Russia’s Supreme Court banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an “extremist” organization in 2017.

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Eighteen worshippers were convicted in 2019 with sentences ranging from large fines to imprisonment, the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia said in a year-end summary. Nine received prison sentences between two and six years.

Last year, authorities carried out 489 of at least 778 raids on members since 2017, the

Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia said.

"Russian authorities should release detained Jehovah's Witnesses immediately, drop any outstanding charges, expunge all related criminal records and halt their persecution," HRW said in a statement.

It said most of the targeted Jehovah's Witnesses are middle-aged men, though at least 39 women, including one as old as 89 years, have faced charges.

Authorities have planted people to photograph and film Jehovah's Witnesses meetings, footage that was later used as evidence against the worshippers, two lawyers who represent the group told HRW.

Some worshippers reported feeling psychological pressure when armed men showed up at their door and said they had to endure hours of searches in their homes.

In most cases, HRW said Russian law enforcement showed search warrants, those detained were granted access to lawyers and most refused to give self-incriminating evidence during interrogations.

Rights groups have condemned the crackdown against the Christian denomination as a violation of religious freedom.

The April 2017 ban forced 395 branches across Russia to shut down and at least 5,000 worshippers to flee the country, according to media reports. The Jehovah's Witnesses group estimates that it has about 170,000 followers in Russia.

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