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Russia Halts Early Release of Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen

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Russia outlawed the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" organization in April 2017. **jw-russia.org**

The early release of the first Jehovah's Witness to be jailed for extremism in Russia has been put on hold after prosecutors appealed the court ruling, the religious organization said Wednesday.

Danish national Dennis Christensen was granted early release last week when a district court ordered him to pay a fine of 400,000 rubles ($5,800) in lieu of his remaining prison sentence. Christensen had been sentenced to six years in a penal colony in 2019 on charges that critics condemned as an attack on religious freedom.

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The same prosecutor's office in western Russia's Kursk region that backed a motion to release Christensen filed an appeal last Thursday to reverse the decision, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia group said on its website.

“It’s unknown what made the prosecution change its position,” it said.

The penal colony where Christensen was awaiting his release has placed him in a poorly ventilated punishment cell for allegedly violating prison rules, the organization added.

His lawyer, according to the statement, said the series of events “suggest that there’s a planned action that’s needed to prevent Dennis from being released by a court order.”

Human Rights Watch called Christensen’s postponed release and placement in the punishment cell “absolutely outrageous.”

“Russia has absolutely nothing to gain from the pointless, cruel and abusive persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” HRW added.

The rights group said a court hearing on the prosecutors’ appeal of Christensen’s early release could start as late as August.

Christensen was arrested in May 2017 at a prayer meeting in the town of Oryol south of Moscow.

Russia outlawed the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an “extremist” organization in April of that year and has since issued a series of lengthy sentences against believers.

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