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Moscow Security Forces Raid Jehovah's Witnesses

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The Jehovah's Witnesses group has been banned in Russia as an "extremist" organization since 2017.
Mikhail Japaridze / TASS

Security forces detained several Moscow-based Jehovah's Witnesses during raids in connection with a new extremism investigation into the religious group's members, authorities announced Wednesday.

Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said Federal Security Service (FSB) agents, National Guardsmen and police officers assisted in the raids at 16 addresses in and around Moscow.

Related article: Over 400 Jehovah's Witnesses Charged or Convicted in Russia, Group Says

The investigative body alleged that the worshippers continued to hold "secret meetings and study religious literature" in defiance of a 2017 court order banning the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" organization.

“In addition, the organizers also held online meetings via video link,” the Investigative Committee said in a statement.

The worshippers face up to six years in prison for participating in and up to 10 years for organizing an extremist group.

"This morning, at least 15 families of believers were awakened by a loud knock on their doors. On television they show how innocent, law-abiding people are being led away in handcuffs. At the same time, no one is able to explain why they are dangerous for the state,” said Yaroslav Sivulsky, a spokesperson for the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, in an emailed statement.

The Investigative Committee did not say how many worshippers have been apprehended.

The Russian chapter of the Jehovah’s Witnesses organization said it was aware of at least 10 early-morning raids in northern Moscow and its outskirts.

Since the April 2017 ban on the group by Russia’s Supreme Court, the Jehovah’s Witnesses said law enforcement officers have raided the homes of more than 1,000 worshippers’ families.

The Christian denomination estimates that more than 400 of its followers have been charged or convicted in Russia between 2017 and late October 2020.

Human Rights Watch has called on the Russian authorities to immediately release all detained Jehovah’s Witnesses, drop outstanding charges and expunge all related criminal records.

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