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Russian Jehovah's Witness Jailed for 'Bible Talk'

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Russia outlawed the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" group in 2017 and dozens of members have been imprisoned in the years since. **Mart Production / pexels**

A longtime Jehovah's Witness has been sentenced to prison in southern Russia this week for taking part in Bible discussions, the religious organization said Friday.

Vasily Meleshko, 60, and his wife Zoya had been practicing Jehovah's Witnesses for more than 30 years when they were violently detained this spring.

The Abinsk district court in the Krasnodar region found Meleshko guilty of participating in the activities of a banned organization Wednesday and sentenced him to 3 years in a prison colony.

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members have been imprisoned in the years since.

In an emailed statement, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia said Meleshko's case went to court after four months of investigation and took two court cases for a guilty verdict to be reached.

"The verdict has not entered into force and can be appealed," the organization said without indicating whether the defense plans to appeal the sentence.

Rights groups and diplomats decried the court ruling as "unlawful" and "astounding."

"The absurdity of the situation is obvious," said Yaroslav Sivulskiy, a representative of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses.

"The reason is that they are trying to ban Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia from doing the same thing that believers are perfectly legal in hundreds of countries around the world — reading the Bible together and talking about God."

Former British Ambassador to Russia Andrew Wood called the sentence after a one-day hearing "extremism in itself."

Meleshko is the fourth worshipper from the Krasnodar region village of Kholmskaya to be imprisoned for his faith. One of them, 64-year-old Alexander Ivshin, was handed a 7.5-year prison sentence in February.

Several others are on trial for extremism.

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