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Siberian Jehovah's Witness Jailed Despite Prosecution Ban

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Russia outlawed the religious group as an "extremist" organization in 2017. **Alexander Shcherbak / TASS**

A Siberian court jailed a Jehovah's Witness on Wednesday despite a top Russian court's recent ban on prosecuting worshippers for joint prayers, the religious organization said.

Anatoly Gorbunov, 64, was found guilty of extremism and sentenced to six years in a penal colony in the Krasnoyarsk region.

Prosecutors had requested an eight-year sentence for Gorbunov, the son of Soviet citizens declared "enemies of the people" who were exiled to Siberia and rehabilitated after the collapse of the U.S.S.R.

"Now Anatoly was subjected to groundless repressions for his beliefs," the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia said on its website.

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Investigators, it added, accused Gorbunov of organizing "discussions with fellow believers of the Christian way of life."

The Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia stressed that prosecutors presented "not a single fact" proving Gorbunov's guilt during hearings that continued for more than a year.

Several recordings of religious meetings and Bible discussions contained "no calls for violence, inciting hatred or other illegal actions," the group said.

A secret witness testified that he saw Gorbunov once "and did not hear anything extremist from him."

"This allegedly was the organization of the activities of a banned religious organization," the group said.

Russia's Supreme Court ruled in November 2021 that joint prayers among members of banned religious organizations "do not contain elements of extremism."

The ban led to the first acquittal of a Jehovah's Witness on extremism charges that month.

Russia outlawed the nonconformist Christian denomination as "extremist" in 2017 and has since subjected thousands of worshippers to police raids, harassment and up to eight years of imprisonment.

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