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Russia Sentences 4 Jehovah's Witnesses to Lengthy Prison Terms

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Sergei Shulyarenko, Valery Krieger, Dmitry Zagulin and Alam Aliyev (L-R). **jw-russia.org**

A Russian court has sentenced four members of the Jehovah's Witnesses to prison terms ranging up to seven years, the religious organization said Monday.

The men in the Far East city of Birobidzhan were charged with organizing and financing "extremist" activities by holding joint worship services. They were detained as part of a special operation involving 150 security agents raiding 22 homes — codenamed "Judgment Day" — in May 2018.

More than four years later, the city's court found the worshippers — Sergei Shulyarenko, Valery Kriger, Alam Aliyev and Dmitry Zagulin — guilty of extremism.

Judge Yana Vladimirova sentenced Shulyarenko, 38, and Kriger, 55, to seven years behind bars each. Aliyev, 59, received six and a half years, while Zagulin, 49, was handed three and a half.

The men denied the accusations against them during their trial.

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"My actions correspond to the confession of the Christian faith, are exclusively peaceful and don't contain signs of hatred," Krieger said on Nov. 14.

"If we stopped believing in God, stopped being Christians, then we wouldn't be persecuted."

Birobidzhan, a city in the Jewish autonomous district, was among a handful of cities that labeled the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" group in 2016.

A year later, Russia's Supreme Court declared the religious group to be "extremist," banning its estimated 400 branches across the country.

Jarrod Lopes, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, said in an emailed statement that the Birobidzhan sentences brought the number of worshippers imprisoned in Russia to more than 110. He said 38 Russian Jehovah's Witnesses have been sentenced to prison nationwide so far in 2022.

"It's unthinkable that peaceful Christian men like Alam, Dmitriy, Sergei, and Valery would be accused of extremist activity and given harsh, lengthy prison sentences usually reserved for violent criminals," he said.

"It's [...] inconceivable that the systematic persecution — at times including beatings and torture — has continued for more than five years."

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