

Situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation: UK statement

The United Kingdom remains deeply concerned about the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation. As we said on 12 March, the ruling of the Russian Supreme Court in July 2017, which rejected the appeal against the decision to categorise Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremists", criminalised the peaceful worship of 175,000 Russian citizens and contravened the right to religious freedom that is enshrined in the Russian Constitution, and in multiple OSCE commitments.

It is with deep regret that we learned that on 13 July, 110 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses were simultaneously searched by Russian authorities in the cities of Voronezh and Stary Oskol. Thirteen Jehovah's Witnesses were detained at the time and two individuals were reportedly beaten during a home search.

The total number of homes of Jehovah's Witnesses that have been searched by Russian law enforcement authorities now stands at over 1,000. As we noted in March, home raids are often conducted in the early hours of the morning by large numbers of masked and armed police.

We repeat our concern that the increasing number of searches, as well as use of simultaneous large-scale home raids, creates the impression of an organised campaign of persecution against Jehovah's Witnesses.

So-called "evidence" used against those investigated and prosecuted includes regular aspects of communal religious life. We again remind the Russian Federation of our extensive commitments on freedom of religion or belief, including from Vienna 1989, as well as Kyiv 2013, where States committed to:

Fully implement their commitments to ensure the right of all individuals to profess and practice religion or belief, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, and to manifest their religion or belief through teaching, practice, worship and observance, including through transparent and non-discriminatory laws, regulations, practices and policies;

For three years now, the delegation of the Russian Federation has assured the Permanent Council that individual Jehovah's Witnesses are able to practice their religion at home, as no permission is required to pray in Russia. However, we have witnessed time and again that any manifestation of their faith by Jehovah's Witnesses can result in the search of their homes, lengthy detention, criminal prosecution and imprisonment.

We again call on the Russian Federation to end the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, and to uphold the commitments on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for all individuals across the Russian Federation.