

# UN rights chief 'deeply concerned' over Jehovah's Witness sentencing in Russia

The sentencing in Russia of a Danish Jehovah's Witness on Thursday to six years in prison on charges of "organising the activity of a banned extremist organisation" has been described as a "dangerous precedent" by the UN human rights chief.

[Michelle Bachelet](#), High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)), said that she was deeply concerned by the sentencing of Dennis Christensen, who was first detained in May 2017, a month after Russia's Supreme Court declared the Jehovah's Witnesses – a United States-headquartered Christian denomination – an extremist group.

According news reports, the group numbers around 170,000 followers in Russia, with around eight million adherents worldwide. They are known for proselytising their faith door-to-door, detailed bible study and among the rules of membership are a rejection of blood transfusions, however serious the medical need, an refusal to take part in military service.

The harsh sentence imposed...creates a dangerous precedent, and effectively criminalises the right to freedom of religion or belief, for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia – *UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet*

Christensen was accused of continuing to organize and work on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Oryol, several hundred miles south of Moscow, despite knowing that the group had been outlawed by the State.

"Criminal cases have since then been opened against more than 100 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, including at least 18 who are held in pre-trial detention," said Ms. Bachelet, [in a statement](#). "Others have been subjected to various measures of restraint, including house arrest and travel restrictions", she added.

The UN rights chief said that the "harsh sentence imposed on Christensen creates a dangerous precedent, and effectively criminalises the right to freedom of religion or belief, for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia – in contravention of the State's obligations under the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#)."

"Various UN human rights bodies, including the UN Human Rights Committee and a number of UN Special Rapporteurs, have raised similar concerns in recent years."

The Russian Supreme Court has ordered the Jehovah's Witnesses to disband nationwide, and his arrest and sentencing, sets a clear precedent for other adherents who are being held, and awaiting sentencing, according to news reports. Christiansen had pleaded his innocence, stating that he was exercising his freedom of religion, guaranteed under Russia's constitution.

"We urge the Government of Russia to revise the Federal Law on Combating Extremist Activity with a view to clarifying the vague and open-ended definition of 'extremist activity', and ensuring that the definition requires an element of violence or hatred", said Ms. Bachelet.

"We also call on the authorities to drop charges against and to release all those detained for exercising their rights to freedom of religion or belief, the freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association."