

THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

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From The European Association
of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

Contribution to the Report of the U.N. High
Commissioner for Human Rights on the
implementation of the new review mechanism of the
Human Rights Council, established by GA Resolution
60/251 and by the Human Rights Council in Resolution
5/1 of 18 June 2007 for the 9th session of the UPR
(Dates of the WG: 22 November – 3 December 2010).

BULGARIA

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General Situation

Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in Bulgaria since 1888. They have been legally registered as a religious association in Bulgaria in 1938, 1991 and re-registered again in 1998 and 2003. Today more than 3,700 persons attend their Bible-based meetings.

Several positive meetings were held in 2009 between representatives of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Directorate of Religious Denominations, some mayors and district governors in Burgas, Dobrich, Gabrovo, and Plovdiv. Nevertheless, the lack of action, and in certain cases, the negative actions of the Bulgarian authorities is a source of increasing concern as shown in the following situations.

Disruption of Meetings

In the following cases, peaceful and legally held religious meetings were recently disrupted by the police or by protesters who due to a lack of action by authorities remain unpunished:

- On April 26, May 3, and May 10, 2009, members of the VMRO political party and the ATAKA political party protested in front of the Kingdom Hall (place of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses) in Dobrich. The protestors hindered the attendants from entering the building while making obscene comments and threatening some of them. After and between the protests, obscene writings were put on the outside walls of the building, and during the night severe damage was made to the stucco. The car of one of the attendants, Yorgos Mavromatis from Greece, was scratched with a sharp tool. In addition to the above, on June 24 and 25, and on July 20 there was again vandalism against the building. Stones were thrown against the walls and the stucco was damaged in several places. The prosecutor was informed, but the criminals were not identified. According to the view of the prosecutor, the vandalism, including the offensive and frightening signs, swastikas, and immoral drawings on the walls of the Kingdom Hall cannot be viewed as a crime.
- On April 26, 2009, members of the VMRO party entered a rented hall in Varna where Jehovah's Witnesses peacefully were holding their religious service. They tried to disturb the meeting by singing and making noise. The prosecutor accepted the complaint by Jehovah's Witnesses only after their third attempt. The protesters' actions were considered as normal.
- On November 3, 2009, in the City of Sandanski, a peaceful meeting by Jehovah's Witnesses was stopped by three police officers, who requested proof of local registration by the Municipality, which is a request without legal basis in connection with a peaceful religious service. Contrary to Article No. 43 of the Bulgarian Constitution and Articles Nos. 9 and 11 of the European Convention of Human Rights, these three police officers gave the order to stop the meetings in Sandanski until local registration is obtained. As a matter of fact, a request to register locally in Sandanski was filed by the denomination in April 2008, but has been unlawfully ignored by the Municipality. According to law, the registration has to be confirmed within 3 days from filing.

Disruption of the Annual Memorial Celebration

Although the Government of Bulgaria recognizes the "Memorial of the Ransom Sacrifice of Jesus Christ" as an official "holiday" of Jehovah's Witnesses, Bulgarian authorities did not intervene during the disruptions of this celebration on April 9, 2009.

- **Ruse:** A mob of VMRO political party members gathered in front of the rented facilities in Ruse, where approximately 70 persons held their service. They disturbed the celebration and tried to hinder attendants from entering the hall. Some attendants left because they were afraid of the mob.

The only intervention by the police was to prevent VMRO activists to enter the hall although the national leader of the VMRO party, Krasimir Karakachanov together with another local party leader, Yulian Angelov, and with support by the political movement "Napred" and the Orthodox Church in Ruse, announced on April 9, 2009, in the "Standard" newspaper, the Internet media "Actualno.com", the local cable TV station of Ruse and other electronic and print media, their resolution to interfere with the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses.

- **Gabrovo and Smolyan:** Under pressure from the Orthodox Church and the VMRO political party, rental contracts for halls for the Memorial of the Ransom Sacrifice of Jesus Christ were canceled in Smolyan and Gabrovo.

Impossibility to Have a Place of Worship in Varna

Varna: The City of Varna issued a building permit for the construction of a new Kingdom Hall on July 7, 2005. Following an anti-Witness manifestation and pressure from the VMRO political party, the mayor issued an order in July 2007 to stop the construction project for technical reasons. Even after the alleged technical problems were corrected, the mayor continues to refuse to allow the construction to proceed even though the law requires that he immediately rescind his order to stop construction. Lawsuits are being filed against the mayor personally and against the City of Varna for these illegal acts. On several occasions, the mayor has stated that as long as he is in office he will not allow Jehovah's Witnesses to build a Kingdom Hall in Varna.

Interference by Authorities with the Individual Freedom of Speech

- In January 2009, Maya Proskurina, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, was invited to have a Bible discussion by a couple, whose 15-year-old daughter was also included in the discussion. Later, the daughter asked Ms. Proskurina to meet her at a park near her school, and she brought along some of her classmates. Although Ms. Proskurina refused that Biblical discussion without the approval of the classmates' parents, three members of the State Security asked her to accompany them to the police station. They falsely accused her of violating Article 7 (5) on the Law of Denominations, which forbids including minors in religious activity without parental consent. Shortly thereafter, the Council of Elders of Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria received a warning from the Directorate of Religious Affairs stating that "such behavior" by their members could have a negative effect on their registration. To date, no corrective statement or apology was received for this unfounded accusation.
- On June 16, 2009, in the city of Plovdiv, two Jehovah's Witnesses, who were in a public place, were ordered by Mr. Slavcho Barnov of the "Municipality Guard" to stop talking to people about the Bible. According to Mr. Barnov, the director of the Municipality Police, Mr. Traycho Kardashev, confirmed that he must apply the municipal law which prohibits all conversation with other people about religious topics without previously obtained written permission by the Plovdiv Municipality. An attorney's letter of advice was sent to the mayor of Plovdiv.

Defamatory Publicity Spread Out by Authorities

In the Spring of 2008, the City of Burgas sent a letter to the directors of all Burgas schools instructing them to organize classes to inform students about what they called "dangerous sects". The information supplied to the school directors targeted mainly Jehovah's Witnesses and contained slanderous and false information. This information was still being read in schools in December 2008.

On November 3, 2008, in a closed session the Administrative Court of Burgas rejected the complaint of Jehovah's Witnesses arguing that there is no evidence of the identity between "Jehovah's Witnesses" and "Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria." This decision was appealed before the Supreme Administrative Court in Sofia on June 16, 2009, but rejected with Decision No. 8126.

Discriminative Pressures on Foreign Jehovah's Witnesses

Several foreign Jehovah's Witnesses such as Trent Lippold in Pazardjik or Barbara Spicer in Plovdiv, are regularly called on by members of the State Security and interrogated, often in a very inquisitive and unpleasant way, about the functioning of Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria.

Multiplication of Cases of Defamation in the Media

Although Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria have taken several actions in order to resolve the following cases of defamation in the media through dialogue, the number is increasing. This negative trend which creates a general context contrary to the respect of human rights, should retain the attention of the Bulgarian authorities.

- On January 21, 2009, the newspaper Borba published a slanderous article written by a locally prominent cardiologist, Dr. Miroslav Ganev, who stated that Jehovah's Witnesses were administering psychotropic drugs to their members. In the same article Miroslav Ganev expressed that his sister, Albena, became mentally ill when she joined the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- On May 14, 2009, German Germanov, a member of the Dobrich City Council, publicly called Jehovah's Witnesses a "dangerous terrorist group similar to Al Quaida" on the local cable television channel.
- On August 27, 2009, 59-year-old Elena Tomova, who recently became one of Jehovah's Witness was found brutally murdered in her home in the village of Vlado Trichkov, near the town of Svoje, northeast of Sofia. Though neither the reason for the murder nor the murderer have been found, several news media described the murder as a "ritual murder" of a "sect" member, unfoundedly associating this unfortunate event with Jehovah's Witnesses.
- In September 2009, the newspaper "Zhenski taini" published a shocking article entitled: "The 'Witnesses' Killed the Fetus With a Wooden Stick," associating Jehovah's Witnesses with such terrible actions as "raping," "forcefully putting people under drugs," "violent removal of children from the womb," or "tearing out hearts of live animals."
- On September 24, 2009, the newspaper "Narodno Delo" published an article in which it was claimed that Jehovah's Witnesses "act under hypnotic influence" and are "associated with ritual suicides and human sacrifices."

Conclusion

We call upon the government of Bulgaria to allow Jehovah's Witness, without interference or harassment, to build houses of worship, hold worship services, and share information from the Bible with others.