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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 February 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



The ban of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation

Statement on the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation, the criminalization of their religious activities, the arrests of dozens of them and the sentence of Dennis Christensen to 6 years in prison

On 20 April 2017, a Supreme Court ruling declared Jehovah's Witness headquarters in St Petersburg and its 395 local communities "extremist", banned all their activities and ordered all their property seized by the state. On 17 July 2017, the decision was upheld by the Appellate Court: 170,000 Jehovah's Witnesses were immediately under threat of criminal prosecution if they carried out any religious activity.

On 25 May 2017, the police cracked down on the JW community of Oryol and put Dennis Christensen, a Danish Jehovah's Witness living in the Russian Federation, in pretrial detention.

On 6 February 2019, after more than 20 months spent in pre-trial detention, Dennis Christensen was sentenced to 6 years in prison for leading the religious service of a banned "extremist" organization.

The Council of Europe, the European Union, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Human Rights Without Frontiers and many other international institutions unambiguously condemned the sentencing of Dennis Christensen.

As of 11 February 2019, 121 Jehovah's Witnesses were under criminal investigation:

Pretrial Detention: 23

House arrest: 27

Ban on activities: 4

Recognizance: 43

Wanted: 4

A seizure procedure of 303 properties of Jehovah's Witnesses is on progress and 20 have already been confiscated. In 2018, their headquarters in St Petersburg, a 14-building complex worth \$31.8 million, was illegally seized. Indeed, the ruling ignored evidence that the Witnesses' office is owned by Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania (WTPA), a nonprofit corporation based in the United States. Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation transferred the property to WTPA in 2000, and WTPA has since paid some \$3 million (188 million rubles) in property taxes to the Russian Federation. Although the Russian government recognized the legal transfer for over 17 years, the district court now asserts that the WTPA's ownership contract is invalid.

Moreover, 205 properties belonging to other foreign entities (e.g., Finland, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria, Norway, Sweden) are expected to be confiscated via court ruling.

The Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience urges the Russian Federation to cancel the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses, to restitute them their properties and to release Dennis Christensen sentenced to 6 years in prison on 6 February for leading a religious service.