

# Minority religions in Eritrea, Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and EU

## 61st Session of the Commission on Human Rights Statement

Mr. Chairman,

Human Rights Without Frontiers would like to draw your attention to the plight of believers of minority religions in a number of countries.

**Eritrea** is without any doubt the country with the worst religious freedom record. It is the UN member state, which has imprisoned the highest number of believers who were practicing their faith peacefully. For years, Jehovah's Witnesses have been the primary target of the Eritrean authorities and have been arrested in great numbers. They have also been deprived of their Eritrean citizenship.

The repression has however extended to other denominations: Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox. At mid-March this year, Eritrean security police arrested 16 Protestants for watching a Christian video in a private home in the town of Adi-Kibe. On February 19 last, 131 Orthodox children aged between 2 and 18 were rounded up by a group of policemen as they were attending their classes at an Orthodox church in the capital Asmara. In early January Eritrean authorities arrested and jailed 25 members of the Catholic Church during a wedding rehearsal in Asmara. Hundreds of believers of various denominations are now in prison, including objectors to military service.

In **Russia**, religious freedom is shrinking. The greatest blow in the last year was the local court decision in Moscow banning that city's branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Though formally the court decision applies only to Moscow, it has triggered crackdowns in other regions. Moreover, the European Court of Human Rights is now processing a complaint concerning a case in which the police raided and shut down a lawful and peaceful meeting of 150 deaf Jehovah's Witnesses in Chelyabinsk.

The denial of permission to rent public buildings for worship services is a continuing problem for many Protestant congregations.

Another new development is the destruction of churches and the firing of religious believers from their secular jobs. The most vulnerable targets seem to be those affiliated with the unregistered Initsiativniki Baptists.

For Roman Catholics, the greatest difficulty lately has been the issuance of visas for their clergy.

In **Turkmenistan**, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Hare Krishna community and Muslims have suffered from having their places of worship demolished by the government. Protestants in north-eastern Turkmenistan have been threatened for holding services and preaching Christianity. Jehovah's Witnesses are still deprived of freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Police and national security officers interrupt small religious gatherings while they are being conducted in private homes; they detain all in attendance, verbally abuse them, and at times brutally beat the detainees. Afterward those present are given heavy fines, with the owner of the home subjected to an even heavier fine. Some Witnesses were dismissed from their employment.

Turkmenistan is also imprisoning those who refuse on religious grounds to serve in the armed forces. There are now five known religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan, four of them Jehovah's Witnesses and one Muslim, the former chief mufti. Religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan have been harshly treated, being regularly beaten, threatened with homosexual rape.

Imprisonment of conscientious objectors to military service is also common practice in **Armenia**, in **Nagorno-Kharabakh**, where the usual sentence is 4 years in prison, as well as in **South Korea**.

In **Uzbekistan**, a Protestant church in the town of Chirchik, a suburb of the capital Tashkent, and the capital's Jehovah's Witness congregation have been denied registration. Refusal to register a religious community is the most common tactic to obstruct activities of religious communities and make them illegal.

On March 8, Women's Day, the security services arrested once more Ahmadaliyeva Rahima, the wife of an imam of a mosque in Tashkent who is in hiding. She has been jailed for several years and severely tortured. Released in the framework of an amnesty, she has been harassed by the authorities, arrested and beaten on several occasions. She leaves four children behind.

In a number of member states of the **European Union**, it is noteworthy that many minority religions are unduly labeled as harmful sectarian movements, which fuels religious intolerance towards their members. Peaceful Muslims also complain of discrimination, harassment by the authorities and undue interference of the state in their internal matters. The latest event this year was the enforcement of internal elections on the Muslim minority by a special law in **Belgium** despite the opposition of the Muslim representative organs duly elected and recognized by the state in 1998 for a period of 10 years. Complaints are currently pending with the Council of State and the Court of Arbitration.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.