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Transcript of the oral testimony by:
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Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

June 23, 2009
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Hearing:
“The Medvedev Thaw: Is it real? Will it last?”

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe for allowing me to testify on behalf of the more than 157,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

The precious fundamental freedoms Jehovah's Witnesses gained following the collapse of the Soviet Union have never been more threatened. We are experiencing a deep freeze—not a thaw—in the Russian government's treatment of our religion. During the 1960's and 1970's, the KGB considered Jehovah's Witnesses to be a foreign religion and a threat to Russia's national security. The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities during that time is well documented. After the fall of the Soviet Union, we experienced considerable relief and obtained national registration in 1991 and are now registered in 73 regions of Russia. However, the Russian government is sadly reverting to dealing with us as it did during the Soviet era.

Since the year 2000, the FSB labeled Jehovah's Witnesses as extremists, and in 2007 all prosecutors' offices in Russia received a letter on methods for preventing religious extremism signed by Deputy Prosecutor V. Ya. Grin. Days after this letter was sent out, 45 warnings were issued to our Local Religious Organizations across Russia. Individual Witnesses were searched, detained, and forcibly photographed. Individual rights were violated as private information was gathered on school children, school teachers, and other professionals who are Jehovah's Witnesses.

This year, events have escalated considerably further. The FSB is working through local prosecutors to file claims of extremist activity against Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Russia. By misapplying the revised 2007 “Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity”, they are trying to ban our religious literature and liquidate our Local Religious Organizations. We are already defending eight lawsuits filed by local prosecutors across Russia on the extremist issue alone. They are also seeking any pretext to close our national office near St. Petersburg with the overall objective of banning our worship throughout Russia. This was the goal of the Golovinsky trial which resulted in the banning of our religious community in Moscow in 2004.

Local prosecutors have hired their own so-called “experts” to study our religious literature knowing that these “experts” will support their accusations. If just one regional court judge anywhere in Russia rules that an item of our literature promotes extremist activity, it will be posted on a federal list of extremist literature and banned throughout the country. Once literature is placed on this list, it is nearly impossible to have it removed.

In February 2009, the Russian Federation General Prosecutor’s Office ordered local prosecutors’ offices throughout Russia to gather any negative information they could find on Jehovah’s Witnesses. They were authorized to involve agencies of the FSB, police, public health agencies, local departments of justice, and military commissariats to try and find such negative information. As a result, over 500 investigations have been initiated against individual Witnesses and our Local Religious Organizations. Thus, the General Prosecutor’s Office is orchestrating a witch hunt on Jehovah’s Witnesses that will lead to the criminal prosecution of individuals simply because of their religious convictions.

For instance, on April 23, Mr. Yuriy Panov was discussing the Bible with local residents in the town of Ramon, in the Voronezh Region when local police stopped him, falsely accused him of committing burglaries in the neighborhood, and took him to the police station. Because Mr. Panov refused to admit to the false accusations, the police handcuffed and beat him. They also forced him to wear a gas mask and cut off the oxygen supply so that he could not breathe. After they threatened to administer electric shocks and sexually assault him, Mr. Panov was so intimidated that he admitted to the burglaries. The police then abruptly ended the torture and stated that they had made a mistake in accusing Mr. Panov of any crime.

On May 24, police in the city of Asbest raided a religious meeting of Jehovah’s Witnesses, without a warrant or legal basis, and unlawfully detained 50 Witnesses. A female congregation member who was present was subjected to police interrogations that were so coercive that shortly afterward she was hospitalized and suffered a miscarriage. A 15-year-old boy who was also in attendance was detained over three weeks in a foster home, despite repeated efforts on the part of his parents to procure his release.

In addition to these negative developments, our Administrative Center near St. Petersburg has been subjected to repeated intrusive investigations by the local prosecutor’s office and numerous other state authorities, with the intent of unlawfully closing it. Although the prosecutor’s office has repeatedly stated that no violations have been found, it refuses to end the investigation which has continued since November 2004. Our appeals to the Russian courts to stop this prosecutorial abuse have been denied and our domestic legal remedies have been exhausted. In March of this year we filed an application with the European Court of Human Rights concerning this matter.

In recent months, Russian authorities have also attempted to obstruct the legal representation and support that we receive from Russian, U.S. and Canadian attorneys in defending our rights in Russian courts. For example, in September 2008, the FSB initiated a disciplinary case against our Russian attorney, Yegiazar Chernikov, who is

defending Witnesses in Asbest and Yekaterinburg. On April 5 of this year, two Canadian attorneys who are Jehovah's Witnesses were deported. And just last month, the authorities attempted to deport James Andrik, an attorney with our Office of General Counsel in New York. These actions by Russian authorities have made it more difficult for us to defend ourselves.

In his November 11, 2008, *Address To The Federal Assembly Of The Russian Federation*, President Medvedev highlighted all the changes that must be made to the present system in Russia so as to promote such worthy values as 'honest courts and responsible leaders,' 'freedom of religion,' and 'dignity of human life.' If these words become reality, then there is hope that the "thaw" will be felt by us. Sadly though, the current reality is that Jehovah's Witnesses are being harassed, deprived of their freedom to assemble peacefully together in worship, slandered, coerced, physically abused, and charged as extremist by the Russian authorities.

Once again, I would like to thank the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe for allowing me to testify about the deteriorating situation facing Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

For Immediate Release

June 9, 2009

Alarming consequences of raid on religious meeting in Russia

ASBEST, Russia—Mrs. Aleksandr Mastyugina, a pregnant woman who is one of Jehovah's Witnesses, suffered a miscarriage after police illegally raided a religious meeting that she attended on May 24, 2009. A 15-year-old boy is also being illegally detained without his parents' consent.

More than 50 members of a local congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses and interested persons had just begun a meeting for religious instruction on May 24 when police and FSB agents raided the rented premises. The officers burst in and ordered the meeting to stop. All in attendance were detained and photographed. They were not informed of their rights, were denied access to an attorney, and were not given the reasons for their detention. All who did not have identification documents with them were taken to the police station. Local ATV television network correspondents filmed the proceedings. The raid was in violation of the Russian Federation law and Constitution as well as the European Convention.

Mrs. Mastyugina was shaken by the raid and detention. During additional questioning on May 27, 2009, officers threatened to put her in a detoxification cell. Then on May 31, 2009, she was again summoned for questioning by the investigator, following which she felt ill. She was taken to a hospital, where she suffered a miscarriage.

Among those detained was a 15-year-old boy whose Witness parents were not at the meeting when the raid occurred. Police questioned him and, against his will, placed him in a children's home. He is still being held there, despite applications filed to the management of the children's home that he be immediately released since there are no legal grounds for his detention.

As noted by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in paragraph 57 of the *Kuznetsov v. Russia*, No. 184/02, 11/01/2007, judgment, the Court stated that "Article 9 of the Convention protects acts of worship and devotion which are aspects of the practice of a religion or belief in a generally recognised form.... It is undeniable that the collective study and discussion of religious texts by the members of the religious group of Jehovah's Witnesses was a recognised form of manifestation of their religion in worship and teaching." Despite the ECHR ruling, the Russian government continues to defy the rulings of the Court. Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide, along with all lovers of freedom, appeal to the government of Russia to prohibit any further acts of violence against Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

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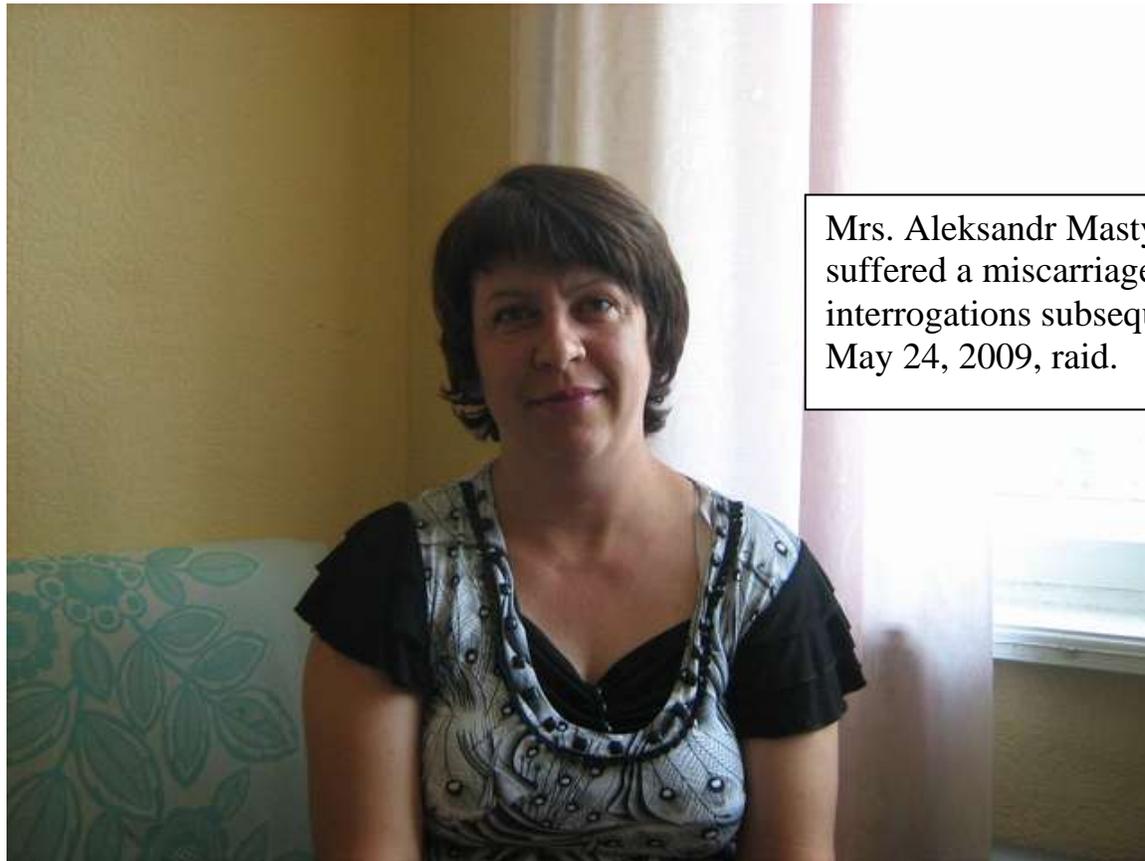
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Police raid on religious meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses in Asbest on May 24, 2009.



Police taking testimony of the over 50 members in attendance at the religious meeting in Asbest.



Mrs. Aleksandr Mastyugina who suffered a miscarriage after police interrogations subsequent to the May 24, 2009, raid.



15-year-old boy who was illegally detained over three weeks in a foster home subsequent to the May 24, 2009, raid (pictured top right).



Mr. Yuriy Panov who was tortured
by police in the town of Ramom,
Voronezh Region on April 23, 2009.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

For Immediate Release

March 11, 2009

Russia launches nationwide investigations aimed at banning the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses

STRASBOURG, France—The Russian Prosecutor General has ordered local prosecutors throughout Russia to investigate the religious activities and beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses. Since February 2009, over 500 investigations have been instigated. The apparent aim is to gather evidence to close down the Witnesses' established legal activity.

Jehovah's Witnesses appealed to Russian courts to put an end to the barrage of harassing investigations and to correct the injustices, but the claims were dismissed. Having exhausted all domestic remedies, on March 9, 2009, the Witnesses submitted to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) an application *Avilkina and Others v. Russia*.

The public prosecutors have persisted in this ongoing process even though no violations of domestic law were found that would justify banning activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. Prosecutors have aggressively ordered unlawful parallel intrusive investigations by various state agencies into the activities and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses. Contrary to domestic law and encroaching on the Witnesses' religious freedom, the Prosecutor General continues to accept and investigate frivolous, vexatious, and unfounded complaints from the same individuals or bodies.

In their search for evidence against Jehovah's Witnesses, the public prosecutors wrote to the Public Health Committee of the St. Petersburg Government requiring medical information on Witness patients. As a result, without their knowledge or consent three Witnesses who at the time were hospitalized had their medical file—containing private, sensitive, and confidential medical information—disclosed by the doctors to the public authorities. One of the patients was subsequently refused treatment and discharged from the public hospital where she was to undergo major surgery.

The religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow was banned in 2004. In the years since then, the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, located in Solnechnoye near St. Petersburg, has been subjected to repeated intrusive investigations by the prosecutor and numerous other state authorities, with the apparent intent of unlawfully closing down its religious activities. The Administrative Center was first registered as a legal entity in 1991. It currently serves as an umbrella for over 400 registered local religious communities of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Russia and represents the interests of some 280,000 Russian citizens.

In the former Soviet Union, Jehovah's Witnesses were subjected to severe persecution, but in democratic Russia they were fully exonerated and rehabilitated as victims of political repression. Many of the communities now being prosecuted have peacefully existed in Russia for decades.

Jehovah's Witnesses are an internationally recognized Christian religion that has been present in Russia for over 100 years. They appeal to the Russian authorities to put an end to the groundless harassment of peaceful and law-abiding citizens, which is what Jehovah's Witnesses are recognized as worldwide.

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