

**Helsinki Commission
Hearing on Human Rights in Russia
Statement by Rev. Igor Y, Nikitin**

May 20, 2004

Dear Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission, ladies and gentlemen,

Modern Russia is going now through the difficult process of democracy and civil liberty establishment. Taking into account the inevitable influence of Russia on the world today we all share one common desire to support this process.

As we all know the freedom of conscience and religion is one of the most important indicators of the democratic level in the country. Tolerance is a fundamental concept of the civil society.

I have to note there are positive tendencies in this area in Russia today. For instance, Protestant bishop S. V. Ryakhovsky is now a member of the President's Council of Russia. I'm glad to report the tolerance is quite stable in St. Petersburg and the Northwestern Region of Russia. The city administration is very open and supports the endeavors of churches. It was especially evident in 2003 when St. Petersburg celebrated its 300th anniversary.

Today I would like to give special thanks to the Helsinki Committee, personally to Mr. Christopher Smith and all the Congress members for their contribution to the process of democratization in Russia. During the persecution of a small church in a little known Penza city their letters to the Government of the Russian Federation and to the Governor of Penza area helped the church assert the right of believers to enjoy their religious liberty. Most recently I have been in Penza. The Governor fired an official who failed to secure the religious liberty and appointed another one. I have met him. His name is Mr. Gorbunov. And I can affirm that he honestly works for the cause of agreement and peace in his region. Today, instead of persecution of Christians, you can see this flag fluttering over the Mayor's Office building.

So, it is undoubted that Russia is on its way to build up the civil society that acknowledges the freedom of the conscience as its most important component.

However, this journey is full of problems and examples of violations of the believers' rights. Below I will give you some illustrations of such cases. But first let me note that most all of them are bureaucratic by nature rather than ideological.

1. Major problem of the Protestant churches today is the requirement of authorities that give registrations to churches to submit the list of the church members. It contradicts the Constitution and Laws of the Russian Federation and we can see it happen throughout the country. Here are the most striking examples: Yaroslavl city, the God's Church; Sayanogorsk city, Hakassia, Church of Praise; Serov city

in Sverdlovsk area, Eden Christian Centre. And the Living Word Church in Ekaterinburg, in addition to the list of the church members, has been requested to submit the written permission of parents for their kids to attend the Sunday school.

2. A shocking situation took place in Tyumen when the eastern Celebrations had been broken up. This year all Christian denominations celebrated the Easter on one day and it became a very important day for uniting all Christians – the Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants.

The Protestant churches in Tyumen rented the Sport Stadium for the corporate Celebration of this day sacred for all believers. Thousands of citizens were invited to join in the Celebration. But two days before the Celebration an official notification from the head of the police department was received. Here is a quotation: *“Administration of the Police Department in Tyuman hereby notifies you that due to the threat of possible acts of terrorism during the Easter Celebration events in the Sport Stadium recommendation to postpone the Easter Celebration to later dates.”* It could be considered an irony if the proposal of the head of the Police Department had not implied an obvious insult of the believers. As a result, to the great distress of Christians the Easter Celebrations were broken up.

At the same time, these very Easter days, the Protestant churches were exposed to a check-up by the Department of Justice and Office of Public Prosecutor. Is it a coincidence?

3. Since 1997 the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religions Organizations has been in effect in Russia. Today, a commission at the Government of the Russian Federation, operating under the leadership of Mr. Andrei Sebentsov, has prepared significant amendments to this law.

Mr. Andrei Sebentsov himself is known for his democratic attitude and positive influence on the process of securing freedom of conscience in Russia. However the practice of the Law implementation is often encountered by the extremely narrow non-professional approach of the officials, especially of those giving the registration to churches.

We encountered by problem most recently. When, according to the Law, we wanted to insert the regional representatives into the Statute of the Association, it was suggested to us to change the entire Statute including the name of the Association from Christian to something else. It robs the Association church-members of their right to exercise their freedom of association.

However, Mr. Chairman, there is one troubling case that does appear to have an ideological nuance, and it needs to be watched very carefully.

In Moscow, after a five-year court battle, city authorities have succeeded in securing a decision to “liquidate” the local Jehovah’s Witnesses organization. The court ruled that group’s practices “break up families, encourage suicide, and threaten members’ health by allegedly not allowing them to use blood transfusions.”

Mr. Chairman, let me emphasize that I do not share the theology of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but here we remember Pastor Niemoller’s warning: if we do not stand up for the others who are being persecuted, there will be no one left to defend us when our turn comes. If someone violates civil law, he or she must accept the consequences. But that is not the issue here. The Moscow Jehovah’s Witness – as a group – have been prosecuted on the basis of their beliefs.

The Moscow court’s decision sets a very bad precedent for the Jehovah’s Witness throughout Russia and has no place in a democratic Russia. It is expected that this case will go to the European Court in Strasbourg.

As I mentioned in my statement to the OSCE on the October Session in Warsaw in 2003 the problems of violation of religious freedom in Russia are mainly caused by the following reasons:

1. Incompetence of many of the officials in the issues of constitutional and legal interaction with the religious organizations and unawareness about the agreements signed by our country within the OSCE and UNO framework.
2. The freedom of conscience and belief is a new and almost unknown concept for the most Russian mass media.
3. The problems are also related to the ignorance of the religious organizations about their legal rights.

We believe today Russia is in desperate need for education in the area of the freedom of conscience and in the issues of tolerance and ethics of relations between the government and churches. It is especially true for the officials of registering services and departments for relations with religious organizations. The World Community with its rich experience in the area can help Russia in this work.

The Association of Christian Churches is ready to cooperate with the World Community in the matters of securing the freedom of conscience in Russia. It can significantly support the efforts of our President and the Government to build up the civil society.

Thank you.