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Jehovah's Witness member goes on trial in Russia

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MOSCOW . The religious group Jehovah's Witness said Monday one of their local leaders in Russia was being persecuted under a vague anti-extremism law.

Alexander Kalistratov is on trial in the Siberian town of Gorno-Altaisk for alleged "incitement of religious enmity and hatred," the group's representative Robert Warren said. If convicted, Kalistratov faces up to two years in jail.

The trial is part of a "larger problem" that Jehovah's Witnesses have been facing in Russia, Warren told The Associated Press. He called the trial a "misapplication" of Russia' 2002 anti-extremism law.

<u>Human rights advocates</u> claim that the law has been used to crack down on dissidents and religious groups that Russia's dominant Orthodox Church disapproves of.

In September 2009, a court in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don banned a regional branch of <u>Jehovah's Witnesses</u> and outlawed dozens of its publications. A 2004 ruling by the Moscow City Court prohibited Jehovah's Witnesses branch in the Russian capital.

A 2004 ruling by the Moscow City Court prohibited Jehovah's Witnesses branch in the Russian capital from engaging in religious activities.

Warren said that Kalistratov, 34, has been accused of disseminating banned literature after he shared some of the group's publications with the residents of Gorno-Altaisk.

In the early 2000s, Kalistratov was acquitted of draft dodging charges, said the group's Russian spokesman, Grigory Martynov.

"He stood trial for refusing to take up arms, and now he's being tried for being an extremist," Martynov said.

There are at least 160,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

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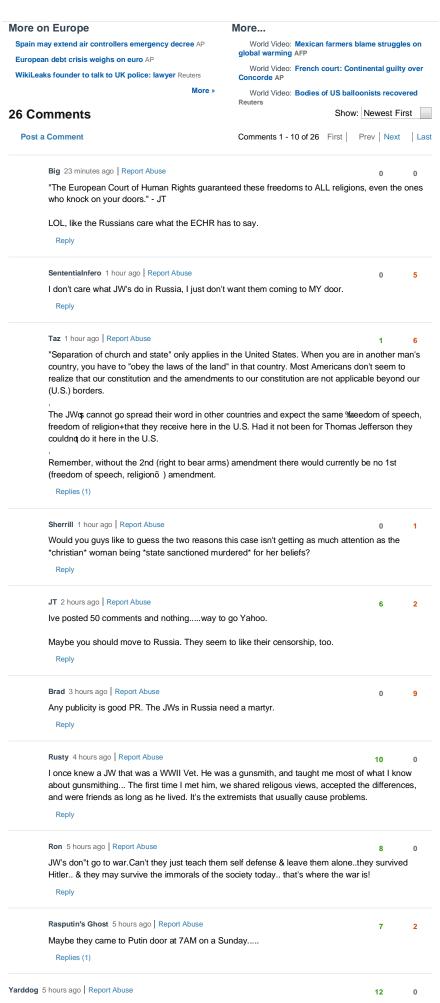
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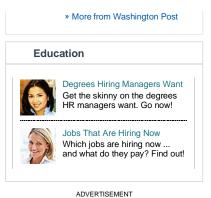
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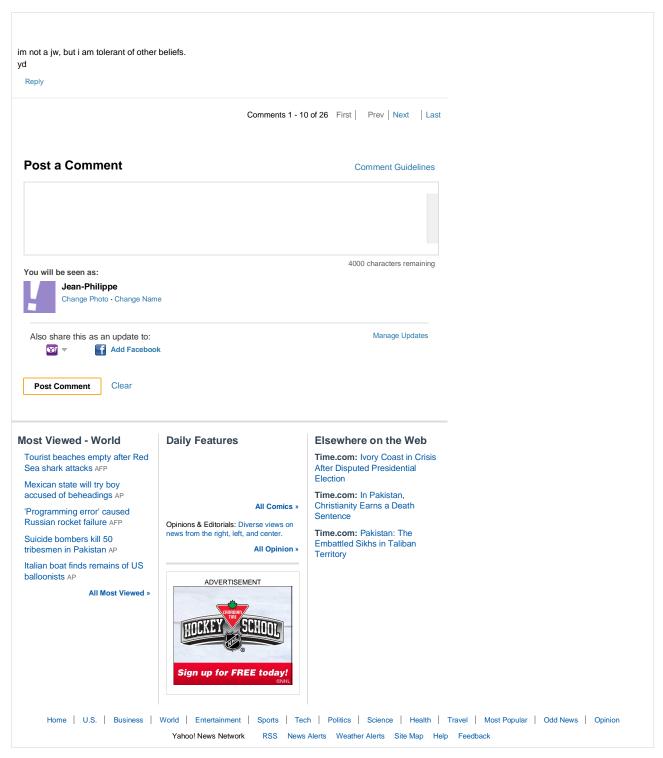
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