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NEWS

Russian Jehovah's Witness Exonerated of Extremism Charges

Apr 15, 2011 by Sophia Kishkovsky

Moscow, April 14 (ENInews)--A Jehovah's Witness on trial in Siberia was found innocent on 14 April of charges of "inciting religious hatred and enmity," in a case that was being watched as a litmus test of religious freedom in Russia.

Aleksandr Kalistratov had been accused of distributing Jehovah's Witnesses literature, which has been qualified as extremist in Russia, according to a Russian federal law that was touted as a tool for fighting hate crimes and Islamic extremism.

The criminal case against Kalistratov was one of nearly a dozen similar ones against Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia. April also marks the 60th anniversary of the Soviet mass deportation of Jehovah's Witnesses to Siberia in 1951.

Critics said the law is applied randomly and unfairly. At a news conference in Moscow, Kalistratov's lawyer read from a Russian Orthodox catechism that described other religions as being "from the devil," and said that if the same logic that prosecutors applied to his case were applied to such literature, thousands or even millions of Russian Orthodox believers would have to be put on trial.

The Jehovah's Witnesses organization in Russia, which is based in St. Petersburg, said in a statement on 14 April that "the charges against Kalistratov and other Jehovah's Witnesses in Gorno-Altai are absolutely groundless and serve as a vivid example of the wrongful application" of the law.

It was used, for example, in the trial last year of Yuri Samodurov, the former director of Moscow's Sakharov Museum, and Andrei Yerofeyev, a curator, over a controversial contemporary art exhibition that angered many Russian Orthodox and nationalists.

Mikhail Odintsov, who represented Mr. Kalistratov on behalf of

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the office of Russia's Kremlin-appointed human rights ombudsman, said the verdict reflects more "the courageous act of" judge Marina Sokolovskaya of the Gorno-Altai City Court, than a larger trend.

He also said that he hopes that the verdict will help officials to "finally open their eyes and see that the fate of millions and millions of Russian citizens depends on their actions, their behavior, their inner convictions and sentiments."

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