

Q&As on the case of Dennis Christensen

Q: What is Dennis Christensen convicted of and what is his sentence?

A: Dennis Christensen was found guilty of "organizing the activity of an extremist organization" under Article 282.2, part 1 of the Russian Criminal Code, and sentenced to six years in a penal colony.

Russian anti-extremism legislation defines "extremism" very loosely, and has been widely used by the authorities to crackdown on the right to freedom of expression and dissent in the country. Amnesty International continues to call for review of the relevant legislation and practice, and an immediate end to politically-motivated prosecution of dissenting voices in Russia.

Q: Why does Russia consider JW an extremist?

A: Jehovah's Witnesses have faced persecution and harassment in Russia since 2009, when a court in Rostov Region in southern Russia banned the local Jehovah's Witnesses' (JW) organization and declared 34 of JW's publications to be "extremist". In subsequent years, several Jehovah's Witnesses' groups across Russia were pronounced "extremist" by local courts. The relevant decisions relied on the vague definition of "extremism" in Russian law, and were consistent with the growing practice of its loose and vague application which increasingly targeted political, but also religious and other forms of dissent. In particular, they cited Jehovah's Witnesses' publications which stated that other religions were "false", and some of their practices such as, amongst other, their refusal to venerate flags and other state symbols or celebrate official holidays which, according to the relevant court decisions, were directed against, or were undermining, the state.

In April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court ruled that the central Jehovah's Witnesses organization in Russia should be closed, its activities stopped, and its property confiscated. This effectively banned all local groups. Since then, any activity on behalf of a local Jehovah's Witnesses group has been regarded as criminal, and this is what the prosecution has held against Dennis Christensen. According to it, he was organizing local worship, and referred to him making respective announcements, collecting donations and organizing cleaning of the venue used by the worshippers as evidence of his "crime".

Amnesty International regards the Russian authorities' decisions to criminalise JW's teachings and practices as arbitrary and discriminatory, and a violation of the right to freedom of religion. The organization has called on the authorities to quash these decisions. It has also consistently stressed that anti-extremism legislation in Russia is often applied arbitrarily and has called on the authorities to review the relevant legislation and practice and bring them in line with international standards.

Q: Why does Amnesty International consider Dennis Christensen a PoC?

A: Dennis Christensen has been prosecuted solely in connection with his religious beliefs and peacefully exercising his right to freedom of religion.

Q: Several other members of JW in Russia are also facing prosecution, but the judgement against Dennis is the first of its kind. What does this verdict mean for the other members of JW?

A:Dennis Christensen is not the first Jehovah's Witnesses convicted in Russia under its anti-extremism legislation, but he was (a) the first Jehovah's Witnesses to be arrested, and (b) the first Jehovah's Witnesses to receive a custodial sentence in connection with his membership of a JW group and practicing his religion.

Q: What will now happen to Dennis Christensen?

A:He has 10 days to appeal the court's decision, and his defence has already indicated that it planned to do so. Until the appeal hearing, he will remain in detention pending the outcome of his appeal. Once the appeal court has pronounced its decision, the sentence will become final. Acquittals are extremely rare in Russia, including acquittals on appeal, although it is quite common for a court of appeal to review the sentence which it may shorten but may also increase. The criminal offence of which Dennis Christensen has been convicted is punishable by either a fine or a prison sentence of between six and 10 years, meaning his prison sentence cannot be reduced on appeal unless his "crime" is requalified as a lesser offence. Since he has spent a considerable time in detention, and unless he is acquitted, it is unlikely that the court of appeal will give a non-custodial sentence in his case. After the appeal court's ruling, the decision in his case will be final, and he will be transferred to a penal colony to serve the remainder of his sentence (if it is still a custodial sentence). The time he has spent in pre-trial detention will count as part of his sentence already served. The conditions in pre-trial detention are generally more severe than in prisons and prison colonies, and by law every day spent there is counted as 1.5 days of imprisonment. Accordingly, if Dennis Christensen's conviction and six-year sentence is upheld, he will soon qualify to request an early release on parole. However, such requests are routinely refused, and are subject to several conditions. One of them – not defined in law but routinely required in practice – is that the prisoner recognizes his guilt and "actively repents" his crime.

Q: What can and will Amnesty International do to support and assist Dennis and the others under prosecution?

A:Amnesty International will continue monitoring this and other cases of human rights violations in Russia, and actively report and campaign – in Russia and internationally – on behalf of the victims. It will continue campaigning on Dennis Christensen's case and continue to demand his acquittal and an immediate and unconditional release. The organisation urges the Russian authorities to review the anti-extremism legislation and the relevant practice and stop its arbitrary application to stifle and criminalise peaceful dissent. Amnesty International continues to demand an end to the discrimination against and persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses and insists that every person's rights to freedom of religion and expression should be fully respected, protected, promoted and fulfilled in Russia.