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From The European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

**Contribution to the report of the U.N. High
Commissioner for Human Rights on the
implementation of the new review mechanism of the
Human Rights Council, established by GA Resolution
60/251 and by the Human Rights Council in Resolution
5/1 of 18 June 2007 for the 3rd session of the UPR
(dates of the WG:1-12 December 2008).**

Marcel Gillet

Chairman of the Religious Freedom Subcommittee

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JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES – SERBIA

June 1, 2007, to May 31, 2008

Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced setbacks in the area of human rights in Serbia. Legal registration has been refused, and negative media reports have resulted in open public hostility. There have been cases of vandalism to meeting places, personal injury from attacks, and public demonstrations fomenting religious intolerance, hatred and violence. Local police officers did not always show great willingness to intervene effectively. Hereafter, please find a detailed report of the human rights violations.

On April 20, 2006, a new Law on Churches and Religious Communities was enacted by Parliament. Some regulations discriminate against smaller religious communities, requiring them to obtain new registration. This opened the possibility that some smaller religious communities could lose their registration, even though they had been already recognized under different laws from 1953 and 1977. Some Parliament members were openly discriminatory in their statements, which only encouraged acts of discrimination on the part of society in general. On July 9, 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses received a decision rejecting their application for registration, and they subsequently filed a complaint with the Serbian Supreme Court on August 7, 2007. The following incidents demonstrate a continuing pattern of discrimination toward Jehovah's Witnesses.

Acts of discrimination

- On June 14, 2007, in Čačak, a family member physically attacked a young Witness when she returned home from a religious meeting. When she called the police, one officer said that the father of the young Witness did good to beat her and that she could leave her home if she does not like it.
- On August 5, 2007, an off-duty police officer attacked one of Jehovah's Witnesses. The officer attacked him verbally using extremely vulgar words. Further, the officer slapped and kicked the Witness. The case was reported to the local police station and the officer was officially disciplined. Charges were filed on grounds of religious hatred and intolerance.
- From August 31, until September 7, 2007, the Serbian newspaper "Večernje novosti" published a serial on "sects". The newspaper linked Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others with Satanists.
- On August 20, 2007, in Arandelovac, a Jehovah's Witness was attacked by a group of hooligans when he affirmed that he was one of Jehovah's Witnesses. In trying to escape, he slipped, fell, and suffered head injuries.
- During the week of March 17, 2008, in Bajina Bašta, the local media informed the citizens about the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses, publishing a picture of the house where they meet and where the Memorial of Christ's death would be held on March 22. Also featured was a negative leaflet prepared by the Orthodox priest.
- During the nights of March 20 and March 21, 2008, unknown adversaries stoned the building where the Witnesses meet, breaking windows and damaging the car of a Witness living in the same house. Police arrived, but failed to investigate the identity of the offenders.
- On March 22, 2008, a large mob gathered and stoned the building inflicting considerable damage. The offenders threatened the lives of Witnesses, shouting religious insults, physically attacked several Witnesses, even hurling stones at woman and children. The home was vandalized inside and out, religious literature was destroyed, and the home owner's car was destroyed. Subsequent attempts to repair the home were again met with mob action. Jehovah's Witnesses filed criminal charges against the perpetrators and filed a complaint to initiate investigation of the police behavior. As a preventive measure, the police could have acted a few days before to have prevented this incident from happening.

Kingdom Halls (Houses of Worship) Vandalized

- On July 31, 2007, a Molotov cocktail (bomb) was thrown on the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in Zemun, damaging a door and the façade. The case was reported to the police, and the Kingdom Hall was protected during the next two and a half months by police officers. Unfortunately, the offenders could not be identified.
- On September 23, 2007, the façade and the entrance door of the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in Batajnica were damaged, only one day after the new hall was opened to the public. One day later, police office Lukovic started holding public lectures in Batajnica against "sects", as organized by the local Serbian Orthodox Church.
- During the night of March 1, 2008, the Kingdom Hall in Sremska Mitrovica was stoned and egged. Some tiles of the fence surrounding the Kingdom Hall were broken. The police were informed. The material value of the damages was small

Conclusion

Jehovah's Witnesses were legally registered in 1953 and 1977 and are hopeful of confirming their legal status again according to the new Law on Churches and Religious Communities. They continue to look to the courts for a legal resolution to their current difficulties. We have called on the authorities to put an end to these attacks as well as to the defamation campaigns that have triggered hatred against our religious minority.