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ARMENIA: Police reinstate Jehovah's Witness – for now

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Jehovah's Witness Zemfira Voskanyan, sacked from her job with the police in the wake of a secret December decree requiring members of minority faiths to be removed from the police, is back at her desk after she challenged her dismissal in court. "We reinstated her in her job," Colonel Arshaluis Budagyan of the Lori regional police, who had originally sacked her, told Forum 18 News Service. But Voskanyan's lawyer Drew Holiner said she was reinstated only on a technicality. "It fails to remove the threat to her job caused by this discriminatory order," he told Forum 18. He said she is now considering a further appeal.

A Jehovah's Witness who was sacked from her job with the police in the wake of a secret December decree requiring members of minority faiths to be removed from the police (see separate F18News article) has regained her job. After Zemfira Voskanyan from Stepanavan in Armenia's northern Lori Region challenged her dismissal in court the police backed down. "We reinstated her in her job," Colonel Arshaluis Budagyan, deputy head of the Lori regional police personnel department who had originally sacked her, told Forum 18 News Service on 25 April. "She is back at her desk." He blamed a "mistake" for Voskanyan's dismissal, saying the order to remove non-Armenian Apostolic Church members from work in the police applies only to serving officers, not to support staff.

However, Drew Holiner, an American lawyer who works for the Jehovah's Witness centre near the Russian city of St Petersburg, who represented Voskanyan in court, remains concerned that she could still be removed from her job for her faith.

Voskanyan, who was sacked on 20 February as head of the accounts department of the Stepanavan police, had worked for the police for nearly two decades. She earns 23,000 drams (297 Norwegian kroner, 38 Euros or 42 US dollars) a month and says it is the only means of supporting her 13-year old son.

The police legal department's written decision to fire Voskanyan stated that she "is a member of Jehovah's Witnesses' religious and sectarian organisation. After work she participates at the religious lessons." It added that the dismissal followed Labour Code regulations for dismissing an employee when "incompatibility with the work status is detected".

"Your being a Jehovah's Witness and working in the police is incompatible," Colonel Budagyan reportedly declared.

Holiner reported that at the first hearing on 9 April at the Lori regional court Budagyan admitted that Voskanyan had been dismissed solely on the basis of her faith as a Jehovah's Witness. He based the dismissal on Order 551-A, issued by the head of the Armenian police, Lt-Gen. Haik Harutunyan on 3 December. Although Voskanyan's legal team asked the court to instruct the police service to make the text of this order available to them, the court refused. The case was then adjourned.

At the second hearing on 22 April, the police brought an order unilaterally restoring Voskanyan to her position and providing her with back pay for the months she had not been at work. "There's a certain aspect to this, though," Holiner warned. "The court terminated the proceedings saying there was no further basis for them." He told Forum 18 that Voskanyan was reinstated only on a formality: that the police had failed to consult her trade union. "It fails to remove the threat to her job caused by this discriminatory order," Holiner insisted. He said she is now considering a further appeal.

Members of religious minorities in Armenia - especially Jehovah's Witnesses - face strong popular dislike. The dominant Armenian Apostolic Church enjoys extensive influence over public policy.

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