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RUSSIA: Governor links Jehovah's Witnesses and Islamic militants as "destructive cults"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Stavropol regional governor Aleksandr Chernogorov has linked Jehovah's Witnesses and Islamic militants as "destructive cults" at a major local conference on "Totalitarian Sects – the Path to the Destabilisation of the North Caucasus". Chernogorov maintained that "Wahhabism" and "Jehovism" [a Soviet-era term for the Jehovah's Witnesses' faith] had infiltrated into southern Russia and were now "attacking those confessions which provide the foundation of civil peace" – Orthodoxy and "traditional" Islam. Jehovah's Witnesses "think that this might be the beginning of something," local Jehovah's Witness representative Ivan Borshchevsky has told Forum 18 News Service. Recently, Jehovah's Witnesses have had increasing difficulties with the authorities. The Stavropol regional religious affairs official has declined to discuss these matters with Forum 18.

On local state television news on 28 September, the governor of Russia's southern Stavropol region singled out Jehovah's Witnesses and linked them as a danger with Islamic militants, at a major local conference on "Totalitarian Sects – the Path to the Destabilisation of the North Caucasus". Both groups flourish in conditions of unemployment, corruption and crime, Aleksandr Chernogorov maintained.

According to his official website, Governor Chernogorov went even further at a working meeting convened in the spa town of Yessentuki in the wake of the Beslan atrocity. Chaired by President Vladimir Putin's then representative in southern Russia, Vladimir Yakovlev, its principal participants included leaders of the region's "traditional" confessions – the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Judaism and Buddhism.

During the recent years of economic and political reform, Chernogorov told the 9 September meeting, "destructive cults" such as "Wahhabism" [an all-embracing term commonly used for militant Islam] and "Jehovism" [a Soviet-era term for the Jehovah's Witnesses' faith] had infiltrated into southern Russia and were now "attacking those confessions which provide the foundation of civil peace" – Orthodoxy and "traditional" Islam. The fact that this had gone unchecked testified to the flawed nature of Russia's 1997 law on religion, he maintained, leading Stavropol regional administration to take "several steps to curtail the activities of destructive sects, with the support of Orthodox and Muslim clergy." One example, according to Chernogorov, was the recent condemnation and dismissal of a number of imams with Wahhabi views by village assemblies (see F18News 2 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=443).

"We think that this might be the beginning of something," local Jehovah's Witness representative Ivan Borshchevsky commented to Forum 18 in Stavropol region's southern spa town of Pyatigorsk on 30 September. When police officers broke up Jehovah's Witness congresses in the region in 2003, he said, they claimed to be acting in accordance with an order issued by Governor Chernogorov, but the governor has refrained from publicly expressing a negative stance towards Jehovah's Witnesses until his recent statements.

The Jehovah's Witnesses' reported that thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses were denied entry by Pyatigorsk police to a hired stadium for a three-day July congress, effectively forcing its cancellation. On 22 and 23 August 2003, the statement continued, police and state officials demanded the cancellation of a sign-language Jehovah's Witness event at a hired circus arena in Stavropol city, the participants of which also cited disruptions to the electricity and water supply. On 29 August, according to the Witnesses, police similarly curtailed a three-day convention to be attended by over a thousand Jehovah's Witnesses at a Stavropol stadium.

Ivan Borshchevsky told Forum 18 that court appeals filed against the authorities' actions in 2003 are still ongoing. While state representatives argue that they constituted necessary measures in view of possible terrorist attacks, he added, similar events have been held at the same venues both before and afterwards without incident.

On 21 June 2004 RIA Novosti Russian news agency reported that Cossacks and Orthodox clergy in Stavropol region's southern town of Georgiyevsk had petitioned the local authorities with a request to examine and take measures against Jehovah's Witness activity in the area, pointing out that the Moscow community of Jehovah's Witnesses was banned by a court in the Russian capital on 26 March 2004 (see F18News 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=289).

Ivan Borshchevsky told Forum 18 that he was currently unaware of any plans to prosecute Jehovah's Witnesses in Stavropol region in the same way as Moscow. The Cossacks' complaint came in the wake of a June 2004 Jehovah's Witness congress held at a congregation's own building near Georgiyevsk, he said, remarking that Jehovah's Witnesses were now able to hold such events only on their own premises, so that approximately a thousand participants for whom there was no room in the Nezlobnaya Kingdom Hall had to sit on chairs outside. Borshchevsky also remarked that it was no longer possible to advertise congresses: "Earlier we used to invite the press and place advertisements in newspapers, but now we issue only oral invitations." Cossacks and Russian National Unity nationalists broke up a Jehovah's Witness congress held in Georgiyevsk in 1999, he pointed out.

Ivan Borshchevsky also remarked to Forum 18 that, while all congregations in his area hold state registration, several encounter restrictions in gathering for worship. Denied permission to buy or rent property, a congregation of approximately 100 members in the town of Lermontov is obliged to meet in several house groups, he said, while one in Yessentuki is down to its last option of premises for rental. Before Borshchevsky's own Pyatigorsk congregation successfully appealed last year against the local authorities' refusal to allow the refurbishment of a canteen it had purchased, he added, one official explained that they had promised then local Orthodox Metropolitan Gedeon (Dokunin) of Stavropol and Vladikavkaz "not to let Jehovah's Witnesses into the town".

Speaking to Forum 18 on 29 October, Stavropol regional religious affairs official Vasili Shnyukov declined to respond to questions by telephone.

According to Ivan Borshchevsky, approximately 2,500 Jehovah's Witnesses now live in the spa-town area of Kavkazskiy Mineralnyye Vody. Rather than the product of recent foreign mission, he said, Jehovah's Witnesses first appeared in the region in the mid-1950s after Stalin's order exiling them to Siberia was annulled: "They were forbidden from returning to either their place of origin or major industrial centres." Later in Soviet times, in 1972, disquieted by the growth of Jehovah's Witnesses activity in the area, Stavropol regional Council for Religious Affairs compiled a detailed report on what it called the "antisocial nature of this sectarian organisation". (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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