

Russians Work to Eradicate 'Christian Cult' From Their Borders

Russia's Supreme Court is to consider whether Jehovah's Witnesses is an "extremist" organization after the justice ministry applied for an order to shut down the group's national headquarters near St. Petersburg.

The Jehovah's Witnesses says it numbers about 8 million people worldwide.

The religious organization is known for its foreign ministries as well as its door-to-door campaigns but has had problems for years with Russian authorities, who view it as a pernicious cult, an allegation it denies.

Authorities have put several of its publications on a list of banned extremist literature, and prosecutors have long cast it as an organization that destroys families, fosters hatred and threatens lives, a description the organization says is false.

A filing on the Supreme Court's website said it would convene on April 5 to consider the justice ministry's application to order the closure of the organization's Russian headquarters and ban its activity.

The Russian branch of Jehovah's Witnesses said it rejected the charge it was an extremist organization. It said such a ban would directly affect around 400 of its groups and impact on all of its 2,277 religious groups in Russia which it said united 175,000 followers.

"Millions of believers all over the world consider the ministry's actions a big mistake," it said in a statement. "If this lawsuit is successful, it will entail catastrophic

consequences for freedom of religious worship in Russia.”

Russian investigators conducted a large-scale inspection of its national headquarters near St. Petersburg earlier this year, carting off many documents.

According to Amnesty International, 16 members of the group in southern Russia were found guilty of organizing and participating in a banned “extremist organization” in late 2015.

Rights activists have criticized Russia for the way it applies a 2006 law which widened the definition of extremism. {eoa}

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