

Foreign Office urges Russia to uphold human rights after Jehovah's Witnesses ruling

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The Foreign Office has condemned a decision by the Russian Supreme Court to label Jehovah's Witnesses "extremists."

Baroness Anelay, the foreign office minister with responsibility for human rights, said the judgement was alarming.

She said that the Russian Supreme Court's decision to describe the group as extremist "effectively criminalizes the peaceful worship of 175,000 Russian citizens and contravenes the right to religious freedom which is enshrined in the Russian Constitution."

"The UK calls on the Russian government to uphold its international commitment to this basic freedom."

Article 28 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation promises that "Everyone shall be guaranteed the freedom of conscience, the freedom of religion, including the right to profess individually or together with other any religion or to profess no religion at all, to freely choose, possess and disseminate religious and other views and act according to them."

But the Supreme Court sided with the Russian Ministry of Justice, which successfully argued that Jehovah's Witnesses "pose a threat to the rights of the citizens, public order and public security".

The group has faced mounting discrimination in Russia. Amnesty International said that 16 Jehovah's Witnesses were found guilty in 2015 of participating in an "extremist organisation."

Its publications now appear on lists of banned literature.

The Russian branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses said the decision was a "big mistake" that would "entail catastrophic consequences for freedom of religious worship in Russia."

NSS campaigns director Stephen Evans said: "This is a terrible infringement on religious freedom.

"Few secularists will sympathise at all with the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses, but everybody who believes in freedom of speech, religion and association as we do should be appalled at this decision.

"It is also worth bearing in mind that whenever any government decides to use the clumsy force of the law to outlaw non-violent 'extremism', all sorts of groups can get caught up. Our own government are right to condemn this decision, but they should bear this in mind when framing UK law."

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