



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Religious Freedom in Russia

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 29, 2004

Thank you Mr. Chairman

The United States is deeply concerned with the June 16 ruling by a Moscow court of appeals to ban Jehovah's Witnesses from practicing their faith in Moscow. Since 1995, there have been efforts in Russia to ban Jehovah's Witnesses from Moscow.

Jehovah's Witnesses' ability to teach their beliefs is central to their faith, so banning them from doing so -- and the formal liquidation of their organization in Moscow -- are violating their religious freedom.

The court of appeals' decision to prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from practicing their faith in Moscow appears to fly directly in the face of OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief.

We feel that the decision sends a very negative message about the rights of minority religions to worship freely in Russia.

We understand that the case is pending before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, and we would call on Russian officials to avoid acting on the Moscow court's ruling until the European Court of Human Rights has reached a decision. And we would call on Russian federal officials to require local authorities to honor commitments to respect the right of all faiths to religious freedom.

Thank you.