

URGENT ACTION

JEHOVAH'S WITNESS AT RISK OF EXTRADITION TO RUSSIA

Nikolai Makhlichev was detained on 21 February in Haradok, northeast Belarus, and is now at imminent risk of extradition to Russia. As a Jehovah's Witness, he is facing unfounded charges of "extremism" in Russia, and years in prison if convicted. He will also be at risk of torture and unfair trial. Nikolai Makhlichev should be immediately released and granted international protection.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Prosecutor General of Belarus
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Dear Prosecutor General,

On 21 February 2020, Jehovah's Witness and Russian citizen **Nikolai Makhlichev** was detained in Haradok and is currently held in pre-trial detention in Viciebsk. He is at imminent risk of extradition to Russia where he would face prosecution under spurious criminal charges, under Articles 282.2 (1) and 282.3 (1) of the Russian Criminal Code for purportedly "organising activities of an extremist organisation" and "financing extremist activities" punishable by up to ten and eight years in prison, respectively. If extradited to Russia, he will be prosecuted for his peacefully held belief, and will also be at a real risk of torture and other ill-treatment and unfair trial. If Belarus extradites him to Russia, it will be in violation of its international human rights obligations.

Nikolai Makhlichev has not committed any internationally recognisable criminal offence or anything which constitutes a crime under Belarusian law and is facing prosecution solely for exercising his right to freedom of religion. He should be immediately and unconditionally released.

Belarusians take pride in their country's centuries-old religious tolerance. Unlike Russia, Belarus respects Jehovah's Witnesses' right to freedom of religion, with 27 communities in the country. By contrast, Jehovah's Witnesses face persecution in Russia where their organisation was arbitrarily banned as "extremist" in April 2017.

Nikolai Makhlichev has applied for a refugee status in Belarus. He should be granted international protection.

In light of the above, I urge you to:

- **Release Nikolai Makhlichev immediately and unconditionally, as he is a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for exercising his right to freedom of religion;**
- **Ensure that Nikolai Makhlichev is granted access to an effective asylum process and that he is not extradited to Russia, as that would put him at risk of serious human right violations and would be in breach of Belarus's non-refoulement obligations under international law.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

After several courts in Russia arbitrarily designated local Jehovah's Witnesses groups as "extremist" organisations, in April 2017 the Russian Supreme Court ruled that the central Jehovah's Witnesses organisation in Russia should be closed, its activities stopped, and its property confiscated. Since then, any religious activity by Jehovah's Witnesses has been regarded in Russia as criminal.

Criminal investigation against Nikolai Makhlichev and two other Jehovah's Witnesses living in Urai, in Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District in western Siberia, started in January 2019. They were accused of "organising activities of an extremist organisation" under Article 282.2 (1) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, a charge that carries a maximum of ten years in prison. A few months later the investigation charged Nikolai with a further offence – "financing extremist activities" under Article 282.3 (1) of the Criminal Code. Nikolai Makhlichev has never held any formal position with Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. According to his representative, he was just a believer who participated in their religious services. During the investigation, Nikolai Makhlichev was put on an interstate wanted list. This has led to his arrest and detention in Belarus.

Amnesty International regards prosecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia as an arbitrary and discriminatory measure, and a violation of the right to freedom of religion. The organization has called on the Russian authorities to quash the judicial decisions that have criminalized Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings and practices. Amnesty International has also consistently stressed that the anti-extremism legislation in Russia is often applied arbitrarily and used to crackdown on political and other dissent and has called on the authorities to review it and ensure respect for human rights in law and in practice.

Amnesty International considers Nikolai Makhlichev and any Jehovah's Witness deprived of their liberty solely in connection with the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion as prisoners of conscience (see here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/02/russia-the-authorities-must-release-danish-prisoner-of-conscience-jehovahs-witness-dennis-christensen/>). They must be immediately and unconditionally released, their convictions quashed and all pending charges against them dropped.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Belarusian or Russian.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 14 May 2020

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Nikolai Makhlichev (he/his)

Also send copies to:

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