

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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Arson destroys religious meeting hall in Russia

CHEKHOV, Russia—For the first time in the modern history of Russia, arson left a Kingdom Hall, or house of worship used by Jehovah's Witnesses, in charred ruins. This comes at a time when official opposition to religious freedom has reached the highest levels since the establishment of the Russian Federation.

The fire started at about 3:45 in the morning of July 11, 2008, in the town of Chekhov, some 40 miles south of Moscow. Vladimir Berezhnoy, a member of the congregation that meets in the building, was on-site as a volunteer caring for overnight property security, when he heard what sounded like an explosion and then smelled smoke. Authorities would later find remnants of the containers and evidence confirming arson as the cause of the fire.

At the time, Berezhnoy ran out into the street and could see one corner of the building ablaze, with another fire at the back of the building. The foundation and nearby grass burned because of a flammable liquid that soaked the area. Berezhnoy immediately tried to extinguish the fire and called the fire station a few miles away (about 4 km). Meanwhile several neighbors and some fellow believers quickly came to his assistance. At 4:00 a.m. two police officers arrived at the scene but reportedly stood by and watched as three members of the congregation tried to salvage some of the contents of the building.

Fire department records show that Berezhnoy's call for help was received at 3:55 a.m. and that ten minutes later firefighters were at the scene. Eyewitness accounts differ. Those present say they had already fought the fire themselves using extinguishers and at least 15 buckets of water. They said they moved a vehicle that was parked beside the hall and rescued what items they could from inside the hall. Photographs taken on mobile telephones show the firemen arriving after 4:27 a.m. By that time the building was engulfed in flames.

Meanwhile, bystanders saw the firefighters sitting for 20 minutes on a neighboring street and said the firemen only reacted after a neighbor who saw what was happening pleaded with them to go to the scene of the fire. At that point two fire trucks arrived at the scene. A crew of six from one of them began extinguishing the fire while the four in the other truck sat by. The equipment they brought had three connections for hoses, but only one hose was used. The firemen left the scene before the fire was completely extinguished, leaving congregation members and a neighbor to douse the flames that continued to burn in the ceiling.

Local police have refused to open an investigation, even after two weeks, claiming that they had not received a report from the fire investigator.

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