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## Church hails Jehovahs Witness ban

From correspondents in Moscow

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THE Russian Orthodox Church today hailed a Moscow court ruling that banned the Jehovah's Witnesses from practising in the Russian capital and prompted strong US criticism.

"We think that the Jehovah's Witnesses doctrine and the organisation's activities provide a legal reason for banning it," Moscow Patriarchate spokesman Mikhail Dudko was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency.

"Under Russian legislation, any religious activities should not damage people's health and security," he said.

Moscow's Golovinsky Court upheld Russian prosecutors' demand on Saturday for the religious organisation to be shut down in Moscow on the grounds the group harms its members' life and health.

The ruling comes after a year long case that has been pursued by Russian prosecutors since late 1998. The Jehovah's Witnesses said they would appeal the Moscow court decision.

The Moscow branch has been accused of "breaking up families, inciting its members to suicide and harming their life and health" by not allowing its members to have blood transfusions.

The group says its members number 133,000 in Russia, including 11,000 in Moscow.

The United States condemned the ruling as a threat to religious freedom.

"We urge local authorities and the Russian government to honour their commitments to respect the right of all faiths to religious freedom," US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.