



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 12: Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Robert Pearson
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, October 7, 2008

The United States greatly values the shared commitment of all 56 participating States to protect freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. We urge all governments across the OSCE region to foster religious freedom proactively for all groups, be they registered or unregistered, traditional or non-traditional.

Targeting of peaceful religious communities through fines, imprisonment of their leaders, and police raids is a distressing trend that must stop. We are particularly alarmed by the growing number of such raids in Kazakhstan. As an upcoming Chair of the OSCE, the Government of Kazakhstan has an even greater responsibility to address government laws and actions that are inconsistent with its OSCE freedom of religion commitments. We also urge the governments of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan to investigate similar incidents in their countries and commit to prosecution of those engaging in such raids.

Some participating States have imprisoned individuals solely because of their beliefs. We call on Azerbaijan to release Baptist pastor Hamid Shabanov. We also urge Uzbekistan to release Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov, Protestant congregant Aimurat Khaburahmanov, and Jehovah's Witnesses Olim Turayev, Irfan Hamidov, Abdubannob Ahmedov, and Sergey Ivanov. We also ask the Uzbek government to review the cases of individuals sentenced to prison for membership in banned Muslim religious organizations, as many of these individuals appear to have been imprisoned based on inadequate evidence and coerced testimony. Furthermore, though we welcomed Uzbekistan's decision to allow the ICRC to return, we are concerned that prisoners continue to make credible allegations of torture and urge the Government of Uzbekistan to follow through on its commitment to give the ICRC unfettered access to all places of detention in the country.

Some participating States continue to imprison conscientious objectors to military service, due to their refusal to engage in military activity on religious grounds. We encourage the governments of Turkmenistan and Armenia to address this problem by providing civilian alternative service options, and to cease arresting, charging, and jailing conscientious objectors, such as Jehovah's Witnesses.

We are concerned that the authorities of some participating States repeatedly have closed peaceful religious organizations without due process. Tajikistan closed three minority religious organizations, and Dushanbe city officials are again attempting to seize the property of a local church. In Kazakhstan, courts have closed congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Shymkent and Saryagash for six months, and authorities continue to attempt to close churches in Almaty

province and elsewhere. In Uzbekistan, Tashkent city authorities forced the closure of the Grace Presbyterian Church after invalidating its registration. We urge these governments to end governmental harassment and allow religious groups to meet peacefully. Religious minorities in Turkey continue to face significant government and legal obstacles in opening, maintaining and operating houses of worship. We urge the Government of Turkey to take steps to end such legal hurdles so that all religious groups in Turkey can legally gather.

Closely related to the closure of religious organizations is the issue of registration. To meet OSCE commitments, registration laws should facilitate and not control or inhibit religious practice. Religious groups in Azerbaijan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have applied for registration and found their applications denied or delayed for spurious reasons. Numerous groups all across the Russian Federation have experienced these same problems. We welcome the fact that Turkmenistan registered two religious groups in late 2007, but we call on these governments to meet their OSCE commitments and ensure the timely registration of applicant groups. Belarus, Slovakia and Romania continue to maintain discriminatory registration systems needing reform, and we also encourage the incoming CiO, Greece, to either abolish laws regulating house-of-prayer permits or ensure that minority religious communities can easily obtain the permits, as none have been granted since 2006.

To better facilitate registration, legal reforms are needed, but we are concerned by draft legislation in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan that would roll back religious freedoms and increase government control. We welcome that all three requested an ODIHR legislative review. We urge them all to fully implement the ODIHR recommendations. We further encourage Turkmenistan to initiate reforms of its religion law and to restore the 1995 conscientious objection law. Uzbekistan is urged to reduce the burdensome registration requirements and remove criminal penalties for unregistered religious practice.

Bans or limitations on religious expression continue to arise in a diverse array of countries, including Greece, Turkey and France. The United States recognizes that governments must balance competing priorities and interests when addressing the extent to which religion and religious symbols should be manifest in public institutions. We think the better approach is to respect, wherever possible, an individual's choice to manifest his or her religion, including through attire or other displays of religious symbols, in schools or other government buildings.

We are also concerned by property issues facing religious groups including the demolition by the Tajik Government of three unregistered mosques in Dushanbe, one church, and the only synagogue in the country. Equally alarming are the seizure of the Cathedral of Praise in Azerbaijan and the continuing dispute between the Government of Kazakhstan and the Hare Krishna, to which we urge an equitable resolution. While some progress was made in Turkey with the recent passage of the Foundations Law, the law needs to be fully implemented and amendments made to address properties sold to third parties in the past. We also urge the Government of Turkey to allow the reopening of Halki Seminary, which has been closed since 1971.

The treatment of religious minorities both east and west of Vienna is a concern. Numerous Muslim communities continue to face intense scrutiny from security services in Russia, with many being denied the right to meet legally. Russian anti-extremism laws are unjustifiably being applied to peaceful Muslims, as well as to other religious minorities. Tensions in the Kyrgyz Republic between Muslims and former Muslims who have converted to other faiths is concerning, and we encourage Bishkek to take steps to ensure that all may change and practice

their faith freely. Muslims in Greece continue to wait for the government to follow through on its decision providing for the establishment of a mosque for the Athens Muslim community. In neighboring Turkey, we urge the Government to remove the religious identification requirement on national identity cards. We will continue to monitor the trial in Turkey regarding the Christians murdered last year in Malatya. We also encourage Turkey to recognize the ecumenical nature of the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch.

The United States is similarly concerned about the treatment of observant Muslims in Muslim-majority countries. In Uzbekistan, some observant Muslims continue to be targeted for arrest on account of their Islamic practice. The Government of Tajikistan continues to inappropriately influence Islamic practice by controlling the operation of mosques and indirectly controlling the selection of imams.

Thank you Mr./Madam Moderator.