

Statement
by Mr. Yerzhan Kazykhanov, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of
Kazakhstan at the OSCE Conference
on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Muslims
(Cordoba, 9 October 2007)
Session 1

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is highly symbolic that the OSCE, which faces the challenge of renewing itself and adapting its political agenda to today's realities, has turned its attention to the issue of fighting intolerance and discrimination. And it is only logical because heightened tensions, fuelled by religious intolerance, still continue to manifest themselves in the OSCE area of responsibility.

A little more than 2 years ago, Cordoba, the City of Three Cultures, was the venue of the OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and on Other Forms of Intolerance, which adopted a declaration that has played its positive role in the efforts to promote "open and transparent interfaith and intercultural dialogue." With that in mind, we view this event as an evidence of continuity of Madrid's policy to promote tolerance and nondiscrimination. We are genuinely grateful to the Spanish Chairmanship for creating an atmosphere of increased awareness as well as for promoting active efforts at the national level to address these issues, using the Muslim community as a case study.

Today, Kazakhstan acts both as a member of the OSCE and the Organization of Islamic Conference and as a representative of a unique multiconfessional and multiethnic Central Asian region, whose population, predominantly, identifies itself as Muslims.

Mr. Chairman,

Intolerance and discrimination against Muslims are rooted both in the policies and public perceptions.

Today, many people in the world, from academics to politicians to the Third Sector activists, are looking for ways to overcome intolerance and discrimination against the Muslims.

Some of them argue that the Muslim states should be given an opportunity to develop on their own, without outside interference, through the process of evolution.

Others highlight the benefits of Moderate Islam concept, which envisions its renewal by instilling tolerance, as exemplified by Kuwait and Malaysia.

Moral standing of any society is judged by how it treats other nations and other people's cultures. The culture of peace starts within us when we learn how to respect the inherent worth and dignity of other civilizations and when we allow them to keep up their traditions.

Intellectuals and mass media have a special role to play in the efforts to improve the image of Islam and its followers. Thus, it is important to explain the difference between such things as "Islamism," "extremism" and "fundamentalism" and to avoid misguided stereotypes regarding the Muslims. Heads of state, religious leaders and opinion makers should be aware of the consequences of harsh statements concerning convictions and symbols sacred to other peoples.

In this regard, actions within the Alliance of Civilizations, which provides for the mobilization of collective will to bridge the gap and overcome growing mistrust among civilizations, cultures and societies, first of all between the West and the Islamic world, as well as for the promotion of mutual understanding among them, has to be widely supported.

As a member of the Friends of the Alliance, Kazakhstan fully supports the Plan of Action of the High-Level Group for 2007-2008. We view that Plan as guidelines containing specific proposals to establish a network of interaction among different civilizations, through dialogue with youth, education, information space and mass media as well as in the area of migration policies.

You might be aware that Kazakhstan, where the preservation of interfaith accord and the creation of an atmosphere of dialogue and mutual understanding in the society constitute an important factor of civil peace and political stability, is making considerable contribution to the religious component of the dialogue among civilizations. Interfaith dialogue is an integral part of the efforts to promote the culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations and to translate

into practical deeds common values reflected in the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document.

Our society has coopted the achievements of different cultures and religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and other religions. There have been no religious wars in the history of our country because religious ideology has never influenced the state power directly.

The multiconfessional status of Kazakhstan is characterized by the fact that we have created in our country conditions for free development of traditional and non-traditional religious associations.

The Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, which serves as an umbrella for ethnic and cultural centers of the majority of ethnic groups living in the country, has become a unique institution of the civil society enjoying now constitutional status. In practical terms, the Assembly serves as a moderator in the relationship between ethnic groups and confessions, on the one hand, and the state, on the other, and provides expertise relating to the policies to enhance interethnic and interfaith accord.

In the interests of strengthening the role of that institution in the society, the Assembly has now been assigned a permanent quota in the Parliament, as a follow-up to the initiative of the President of Kazakhstan.

Speaking in general, the process of building mutual understanding at the national level has demonstrated the need to ensure constructive interaction among ethnic groups, religions, states and governments. Kazakhstan's initiatives with regard to dialogue among religions and cultures are rooted in its awareness of that need.

Since 2003, the Republic of Kazakhstan has been hosting international events on that issue, including a conference on peace and conciliation and the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which has become a permanent forum.

In September of 2006, our capital Astana became the venue of the Second Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, whose final declaration was issued as a document of the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council. In the declaration of the Congress, among other things, representatives of major religions of the world urged the international community to work to establish a fair world order, to strengthen international law and the rule of law and to implement United Nations resolutions and international treaties.

We believe that it is important to actively engage representatives of all major religions and well-known theologians and leaders of religious and ethnic communities in a discussion of issues involving the dialogue among religions and cultures.

Drawing on our own experience in advancing interfaith dialogue, we plan to convene by the end of 2008, at the level of foreign ministers, a forum with a broad agenda under the theme "The Muslim World and the West". We have already secured support by key Islamic states and the General Secretariat of the Organization of Islamic Conference. Our objective is to move the dialogue, which, admittedly, is not a new idea, into the realm of practical solutions to that global problem.

Using this podium, I would like to call on the participants in this Conference to support Kazakhstan's another initiative in that area, reflected in the General Assembly resolution 61/221, to declare one of the coming years an International Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures.

Mr. Chairman,

Today, in our view, we have to find a way for joint participation in the implementation of programs to ensure greater mutual tolerance and higher level of social adaptability of Muslims to life within the fabric of Western societies. Joint efforts of Western countries and the Muslim world, in our opinion, should be directed towards, first of all, meeting educational and employment needs of the Muslim youth, involvement of Muslim women into social and economic life of Western countries as well as participation of mass media in reducing – instead of inciting - interfaith tensions.

There is a reverse side of the coin too. The ease with which an idea of Islamic threat has gained currency nowadays seems to suggest that it is time to speak not about the threat from Islam but about the need of real protection of Islam itself.

Aware of the negative potential of Islamophobia, we believe that it is in the interests of the Western expert community, politicians and journalists to jointly oppose speculations around the subject in order to find a way out of that dead-end. I believe that it is in our common interest to do away with dangerous stereotypes, which divide people and put global security in jeopardy.

Mr. Chairman,

Intolerance and conflict can be prevented through tireless efforts in day-to-day activities and by taking timely and concrete actions at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Our life seems to reaffirm the relevance of an age-old-wisdom, don't forget the past, live in the present and think about the future.

In our interdependent world, there is no alternative to tolerance, dialogue, compromise, cooperation and peace.

The goals that we have set for ourselves can be achieved only through joint efforts.

Thank you for your attention.