



United States Mission to the OSCE

Working Session 15: Fundamental freedoms II, including: Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

As prepared for delivery by Daniel L. Nadel
Director of the Office of International Religious Freedom, Department of State
OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting,
Warsaw, September 30, 2015

The signers of the Helsinki Final Act, like the signers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, recognized that professing and practicing one's religion, alone or with others, is a human right and fundamental freedom of every individual.

The United States welcomes ODIHR's appointment of a Senior Advisor and an Associate Officer on Freedom of Religion and Belief.

The Serbian Chairmanship-in-Office, in cooperation with ODIHR, convened a conference in May that discussed the under-reporting of hate crimes and incidents against Christians in the OSCE region. We call on participating States to strengthen trust with faith communities, writ large, and to work to ensure that laws, policies, and their implementation are adequate to meet international obligations and commitments.

Some OSCE participating States continue to treat the exercise of freedom of religion as a threat to national security and use the language of "combatting extremism" as a pretext to harass and intimidate peaceful religious adherents. In many of these same countries, individuals can be detained or imprisoned for simply speaking about their faith in public or gathering for worship without express permission from authorities. Paradoxically, these and similar efforts to repress peaceful religious activity ultimately force religious adherents into the shadows and exacerbate grievances that could lead to radicalization and violence.

Uzbekistan has reportedly imprisoned as many as 15,000 people of faith on vague allegations of so-called "religious extremism." Many of the imprisoned are Muslims involved with religious instructors who are not authorized by the government. The Government of **Russia** has used vaguely formulated anti-extremism laws to justify arrests and raids on homes and places of worship.

In other countries, including **Tajikistan** and **Turkmenistan**, religious groups must undergo a cumbersome and arbitrary registration process and members of unregistered groups risk criminal or civil sanctions for carrying out their activities. Authorities in these places have arrested and detained peaceful religious adherents and conducted raids on their places of worship. In countries such as **Kazakhstan**, **Azerbaijan** and **Belarus**, governments impose strict limits on, or require prior authorization for, the importation, distribution, and sale of religious materials; violations may be punishable by detentions or fines.

In **Azerbaijan**, we are particularly concerned about two members of the Jehovah's Witness community arrested for allegedly distributing religious literature without the government's approval; they have been held in pretrial detention since February.

In **Tajikistan**, we remain concerned about the so-called "Parental Responsibility Law" that bars anyone under age 18 from attending places of worship, as well as prohibitions against nearly all women in the country from attending mosques.

We welcomed the release of 10 individuals imprisoned for their beliefs in **Turkmenistan** in February, but are concerned that authorities there have subsequently imprisoned other believers, including those serving sentences for refusing on religious grounds to perform military service.

Russia's purported annexation of Crimea and aggressive actions in eastern **Ukraine** have significantly undermined freedom of religion in areas under Russian and separatist control. In Crimea, Russian occupation authorities require religious groups to register with the government of Russia and have reportedly approved one percent or fewer of these applications. In the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk under separatist control, religious groups not associated with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) have been targets of violence, discrimination, property damage and seizures.

Madam moderator, it was in Kyiv, two years ago, that participating States made new commitments on freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, including a commitment to the rights of non-believers. We call on all participating States to implement this and all of our existing commitments on human rights and fundamental freedoms.