



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Law on Religion in Tajikistan

As delivered by Chargé d' Affaires Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
April 2, 2009

Madam Chairwoman,

The United States joins the EU in expressing our deep regret that Tajik President Rahmon on March 25 signed into law highly restrictive legislation on freedom of conscience and religious associations. Numerous provisions in the law violate Tajikistan's OSCE commitments on freedom of belief and assembly.

In particular, the United States is concerned that the law gives excessive power to the state to control the activities of religious associations. Provisions in the law would dramatically increase the membership threshold to register a religious organization, would tighten censorship of religious publications, would restrict the conduct of religious rites to officially-approved places of worship, would constrain children's religious activities and education, would require state permission for contact with foreign co-believers, and would make the appointment of imams and activities of mosques vulnerable to political interference. Taken as a whole, this law paints a dim picture of religious tolerance in Tajikistan.

Although various versions of the legislation have been discussed over the last two years, we are aware of only a few instances where the concerns of religious groups, non-governmental organizations or international experts – including the ODIHR Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion – were taken into account. We also understand that both houses of parliament passed the religion law without any substantial debate, due in part to the unwillingness of parliament to make the most recent draft of the law available for full public scrutiny.

The United States fully understands concerns about religious extremism and the need to address this issue comprehensively. We believe, however, that this law will stifle freedom of religion, isolate minority religious groups, and possibly foment further extremism. Moreover, excessive government intrusion undermines our shared undertakings, including that in Copenhagen in 1990, in which we all agreed to "recognize and respect the freedom of the individual to profess and practice, alone or in community with others, religion or belief acting in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience."

We hope the Tajik Mission to the OSCE will relay these concerns to authorities in Dushanbe, and we appeal to the government to ensure continued religious tolerance in the country. We encourage the Tajik authorities to take advantage of assistance offered by the OSCE Office in Tajikistan and the ODIHR on interpreting and implementing this and other legislation.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.