

STATEMENT BY BARNABAS FUND ON ISSUES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN
CENTRAL ASIA

RECOMMENDS:

OSCE, through its own actions and the actions of individual state representation with the Central Asian countries concerned, continue to press for greater respect for religious freedom and for their international engagements under MC Decision 4/03 Maastricht. In particular, individual religious freedom should be upheld, and freedom to manifest religion should not be restricted by burdensome bureaucratic obstacles to registration of churches and other associations.

I recommend continued vigorous promotion of international norms on these issues in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan and look forward to the publication shortly of OSCE best practice guidelines on registration administration.

It is noted that individual freedom of belief is absolute, and may not be restricted by the state. This includes the right to change one's belief to another faith or none, the right to religious practice, and the right to personal integrity on these issues and not suffer harsh police treatment. It is also noted that restrictions on the corporate manifestation of religion may be limited but only on very specific and limited grounds. It is not appropriate that, for example, non-standard religious denominations that are demonstrably peaceful and possibly pacifist, should be refused registration on vague state-security grounds. Finally it should be underlined that administrative registration should not be a requirement for a group to manifest their religion as provided under UDHR Article 18.

KAZAKHSTAN:

I draw attention to the intolerance of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, as well as other groups such as Ahmadiyya Muslims, in some areas of Kazakhstan. Difficulties include administrative obstacles to registration, limits of access to media, and discrimination in employment.

Administrative Code Article 375 requires official personal registration as a 'missionary'. This has been used to charge people for talking to others about their faith, inviting friends to a religious event, and even possibly for participating in an event where other non-believers are present.

KYRGYZSTAN:

In 2012 U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay noted during her first visit to Kyrgyzstan that "*discrimination, especially on ethnic, religious and gender grounds, remains a deeply problematic issue*" in the country.

Kyrgyz Republic favours state Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church, but is generally hostile to the small populations of protestant or evangelical Christians, as well as other groups such as Ahmadiyya Muslims.

Kyrgyzstan continues to make it difficult for protestant churches to officially register, using high thresholds, and non-registration is used to harass pastors and members.

Attacks on Christians are not treated seriously, and perpetrators go unpunished. Converts to Christianity can be attacked by family and community, without any intervention from the authorities. This impunity increases the public tendency to persecute Christians.

One particular problem for protestant Christians is the difficulty to find places to bury their dead as they are often prohibited by officials and Muslim groups.

TAJIKISTAN:

The government suppresses and punishes all religious activity independent of state control, and imprisons individuals on unproven criminal allegations. These restrictions and abuses primarily affect the country's majority Muslim community, but also target minority communities, particularly Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The 2009 religion law establishes onerous and intrusive registration requirements for religious groups; criminalizes unregistered religious activity as well as private religious education and proselytism.

Grace Sunmin Church, the country's largest Protestant congregation, lost its appeal to save its property from repossession by Dushanbe city authorities and had to vacate the premises. Another registered Protestant church in Dushanbe, whose building was demolished in 2008, has still not received any compensation. Non compensation appears to be official practice.

TURKMENISTAN:

Again unreasonable obstacles to the registration of churches remains a major issue for many protestant groups. Access to religious materials is often limited; in 2012 Begjan Shirmedov, the leader of a registered Protestant community in Dashoguz, was questioned by police for hours for trying to copy personal religious poetry without a license. His case reportedly remains under investigation by the local police unit for counter-terrorism and organized crime.

Also in February 2012, after a raid on a private home, four protestants in Ashgabat were briefly detained, had Bibles confiscated, and were threatened by an official; they were fined for possessing "illegal" religious literature.

Light to the World Church in Mary has had its application for registration bogged down for six years. This non-registration has been used to put extreme pressure on Pastor Nurliev, his family and some church members.

A Christian children's camp in Mary was raided for unknown reasons a few months ago.

UZBEKISTAN:

Has some of the most restrictive rules and practices in the region. Conduct of the police is sometimes brutal, even against women and children. Intolerance of non-state sanctioned religion is rampant among the media, both official and private.

All exercise of religious activity is illegal without state permission, which is totally contrary to international rules and norms including some to which Uzbekistan is signed up to. These registration requirements are overly burdensome, complex, and require the administrative agreement of the local community expressed through the local administration. The requirement appears to even include meeting together in private homes for prayer or Bible study. Even for personal reading of the Bible, it appears to be a requirement that this can only be done in a public accredited building – and this has led a number of Christians to remove Bibles from their homes for fear of a police raid.

Bibles and other religious materials can be confiscated and burned by the authorities.

All non-Russian Orthodox and non-state Islam is banned in the NW region of Karalapakstan.