



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Kazakhstan

As prepared for delivery by Political Counselor Christopher Robinson
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
December 13, 2012

As we approach the one year anniversary of the violence in Zhanaozen on December 16, the United States recognizes the efforts the government of Kazakhstan is taking to address the legitimate needs of residents of Zhanaozen. However, we also note with serious concern recent efforts by the government of Kazakhstan to use the legal system to silence opposition voices and those critical of the government. These developments follow several actions over the past year to restrict the space for independent voices in the name of security and countering extremism.

On November 21, the Almaty General Prosecutor brought suits against two opposition political organizations, and opposition media outlets to ban them for inciting social discord, alleging they were extremists. Moreover, the courts ordered the political parties and media outlets to suspend their operations while the court adjudicates the case. Many of these media outlets provided a platform for independent journalists and human rights defenders to express critical views of the government. Civil society observers in Kazakhstan and abroad have widely decried the government's actions against the opposition parties and media groups as politically motivated. Other independent media continue to experience problems, including harassment, high fines for libel, and even violent attacks against journalists.

The government of Kazakhstan has traditionally been tolerant of religious diversity and practice. Some small non-traditional religious organizations, however, have not been permitted to re-register under a new religion law and face potential limitations on their members' ability to freely practice their faith. While the government has justified the new law's more restrictive requirements as a necessary tool to combat extremism, the fact that completely peaceful but small groups are being excluded from recognition raises concerns about the impact of the law on the rights of minorities.

A vibrant, independent civil society is a key ingredient of a stable and functioning democracy. The United States calls on the government of Kazakhstan to amend its laws on libel and inciting social discord, to promote the development of an independent judiciary, and to allow the unrestricted operation of opposition political parties, independent media outlets, civil society activists, and those wishing to peacefully practice their faith.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.