



Forum 18 <http://www.forum18.org>
The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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Session 3: Combating intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions

Ambassador Lenarčič has accurately described freedom of religion or belief as “one of the most central and longstanding of the OSCE human dimension commitments”. This is because genuine security requires a comprehensive framework for peace and stability - including respect for everyone's freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental freedoms. Experience within the OSCE area is that violating any one community's freedom of thought, conscience or belief is linked to violations of everyone else's freedom of religion or belief - whatever their religious or non-religious views may be - as well as violations of other fundamental freedoms, such as of expression and of peaceful assembly.

Kazakhstan, in taking on the role of OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, has clearly indicated its wish to be seen in the light of the OSCE human dimension commitments it has made. But as is often noted, it is necessary throughout the OSCE area to move from commitments to implementation. To create a comprehensive framework for peace and stability, the Helsinki Final Act acknowledges as one of its 10 guiding principles "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief". So it is disturbing that Kazakhstan continues to violate commitments. Among violations Forum 18 has documented against religious believers including Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Baha'is, Hare Krishna devotees, and Muslims are: attacks on religious freedom and the encouragement of intolerance against people exercising their right to religious freedom by officials ranging from President Nazarbaev down to local officials - for example by associating peaceful religious groups with terrorism; legal restrictions on freedom of religion or belief; raids, interrogations, threats and fines affecting both registered and unregistered religious communities and individuals; restrictions on the social and charitable work of religious communities; and prosecutions of people for sharing their beliefs “illegally”.

These are not the worst or the only violations of freedom of religion or belief of all people in the OSCE area. In Uzbekistan the torture of and threats of torture against religious believers detained during raids on meetings for worship is very common. Female religious believers are often particular targets for male officials. In Azerbaijan, which has closed some mosques and Christian churches, and barred Muslims from praying outside during Friday prayers, this time last year a package of laws was passed imposing future state controls on all religious communities. These violations of OSCE commitments add further to the country's sorry record of actions against people exercising freedom of religion or belief, such as Muslim readers of Said Nursi's works and Jehovah's Witnesses being raided and detained, Baptists denied legal status, Georgian Orthodox churches kept closed against the wishes of their people, or those who just want to read religious literature being censored by the state.

Belarus almost has an annual state ritual, whereby some Catholic priests and nuns - often engaged in social work open to all, such as anti-alcohol addiction work - are at the end of each year denied permission to work and de facto expelled from the country. As a Kyrgyz Baha'i commented on similar behaviour: "Our country has so many urgent problems - poverty, the lack of medicine, AIDS, crime, corruption. Why don't officials work on these instead of making life harder for religious believers?"

So what can be done? Recommendations for participating States & the OSCE as a whole could include:

- freedom of religion or belief violations to be seen as not only attacks on particular people or communities, but also as attacks on the fundamental rights and freedoms of all people;
- continue to affirm the dependence of genuine tolerance and non-discrimination on effective protection for fundamental human rights and the rule of law;
- insisting that politically binding human dimension commitments are for implementation by all participating States - including those holding the Chairperson-in-Office role;
- OSCE institutions and field operations mainstream freedom of religion or belief in human dimension work, taking full advantage of the ODHR's expertise.

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