

## SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The opening session of the conference was moderated by Mr. Orozbek Modaliev, formerly first secretary to the Kyrgyz Embassy in Uzbekistan. Governor of Jalal-Abad Oblast, Mr. Sultan Urmanaev, opened the conference and welcomed the participants. After providing a brief overview of conditions in Jalal-Abad Oblast, Governor Urmanaev outlined the responsibilities of governments to protect freedom of belief and conscience, as well as to increase tolerance and understanding, *inter alia*.

Mr. Omurzak Mamayusupov, Head of the State Commission on Religious Affairs, continued the opening statements with a warm welcome on behalf of the SCRA and brief information about the Commission's work. On behalf of the OSCE/CoE Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Department of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and sponsor of the conference project, Ms. Harriet Hall welcomed the participants and thanked them for their great interest in this important sphere and noted the importance to promote freedom of belief. Finally, Ms. Chinara Iskakova from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, emphasized, as a co-sponsor of the conference, the importance of the need to promote freedom of belief and tolerance. Michael McNamara, from the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, presented the opening plenary session with a word of welcome and a call to promote international standards in freedom of belief and expression.

Outlining the principles of the OSCE, the moderator concluded the opening plenary session and noted that the organization's objectives were two-fold: one, to promote understanding and confidence between individuals including between individuals and their governments; and two, to increase confidence between states. In this respect, he emphasized that it is important to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of belief and expression.

Keynote speaker, Dr. Jeremy Gunn, focused on the relationship between freedom of belief and state security. Using a basic game theory model, Dr. Gunn examined two possible state responses to the nexus of religion and security. He demonstrated that security increases as basic freedoms such as that of belief are fully protected and based therefore on cooperation between the state and its citizenry because both will benefit from the increased confidence and compliance. He then examined several examples of the relationship between security and freedom of belief before concluding with an overview of OSCE standards.

Dr. Anna Kreikemeyer also examined the relationship between security in the name of public order and protection of human rights including freedom of belief and examined the role of political Islam in Tajikistan. By studying the peace process and nation-building transformation, Dr. Kreikemeyer probed the possibilities of a secular-islamist compromise process, which can be modeled beyond Tajikistan. After outlining CORE's project in this field, she highlighted the role of national-level secular-islamic dialogue. She also noted that protection of freedom of belief is a useful tool in the prevention of terrorism.

The second session of the conference focused on national standards of freedom of belief and expression in each of the Central Asian OSCE participating states and was

moderated by Omurzak Mamayusupov, Head of the State Committee on Religious Affairs of Kyrgyzstan. Representatives of the parliaments, ministries, state commissions on religious affairs, spiritual boards and the OSCE gave an overview of the situation in each of the countries, noting achievements and situations in which improvement needs to be sought.

Mr. Alisher Sabirov, parliamentary deputy, began the second session with an overview of the legislative framework relating to freedom of belief in Kyrgyzstan. Mr. Sabirov emphasized that the “church,” and by extension, religion, is separate from the state. As such, the state has a responsibility to guarantee the right to freedom of belief to each citizen. Mr. Sabirov also noted that both major Islamic and Orthodox Christian holidays are officially recognized. Many other Christian religions are also officially recognized in Kyrgyzstan. He also provided the audience with a profile of the draft law on religion and religious organizations, which he is sponsoring in the Kyrgyz Parliament.

Tajikistan’s representative of the Committee on Religious Affairs, Ms. Sanavbar Alifovna Nurova, provided a brief historical synopsis of freedom of belief in Tajikistan. She also outlined the normative-legal framework of freedom of belief and expression, and described many of the rights citizens of Tajikistan have in respect to this international standard. She noted that each national of Tajikistan has the full right to define his or her relationship towards any religion (or not to adhere to any religion). Finally, Ms. Nurova discussed the role of religious organizations in Tajikistan.

The Head of the International Department of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, Mr. Abdulla Ismailov, described the culture of Islam as one which promotes peace, tolerance and anti-terrorist attitudes, which is based on the principle of peace and friendship. As traditions in Uzbekistan resemble those principles, adherents of all religions have the right to practice their religion.

Mr. Gaziz Telebaev, of the Ministry of Culture of Kazakhstan, described the religious identification of Kazak citizens and the current religious situation, as well as their legal and normative implications. Mr. Telebaev, as with other presenters, noted a stark growth of religiosity during the past 10 years. Due to these changes and the need to comply with international standards, he advocated that certain changes should be introduced into the legislative framework, particularly the law on religion and religious organizations. Finally, he enumerated OSCE/ODIHR recommendations in which several concerns must be addressed in the law in order to better meet international standards.

Mr. Andrzej Suda, OSCE Human Dimension Officer in Ashgabat, elaborated on respect for freedom of belief in Turkmenistan. He noted that only two religions – Islam and Orthodox Christianity – are registered in Turkmenistan. While the Constitution of Turkmenistan guarantees freedom of religion, restrictions are placed on worship and unregistered religions are prohibited. The Department for the Coordination of Religious Affairs is justified to hire experts to work on its behalf in religious establishments such as mosques and churches.

The third session was moderated by Ms. Aynash Abylgazieva, Head of the Department for Strategic Research, International Institute for Strategic Studies –

Kyrgyzstan and focused on the “Promotion of Freedom of Belief: Views from Religious Leaders, Non-governmental organizations, Legislators, Academics and Government Agencies.”

Speaking on the integration of Muslims into British society, Councillor Afzal Khan, provided an example of a pluralistic society based on tolerance and religious freedom. He also described efforts made by the government and Muslim community leaders to establish dialogue, especially after 11 September terrorist attacks. Mr. Khan also examined how Islamic governments treat minorities within their state.

Kimsanbai-Aji, Mufti of Kyrgyzstan; Mr. Omurzak Mamayusupov, Head of the State Committee on Religious Affairs in Kyrgyzstan; Mr. Mukhiddin Kabirov, Deputy Head of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan; Ms. Indira Raimberdieva, Peace-building NGO, Kyrgyzstan; and Father Reimgen, Russian Orthodox Church in Osh, Kyrgyzstan then participated in a panel discussion on the above-mentioned topic.

Kimsanbai-Aji noted that Islam encompasses many beliefs based on peace and understanding. Mr. Mamayusupov elaborated on the role of the State Commission on Religious Affairs to balance the needs of the state and the needs of religious organizations. Using the experience in Tajikistan, Mr. Kabirov noted that the legalization of a religious-based political party served as a stabilizing factor in peace talks. Ms. Raimberdieva noted several problems related to the expression of freedom of belief including a low level of religious understanding and a lack of information, and secondly, that unbalanced social and political actions are often illegal and may lead to repression towards some religious organizations. Father Reimgen spoke on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church after the transformation brought about by independence.

The remainder of the conference was devoted to general discussions and working group discussions.<sup>1</sup> Speakers and participants alike noted the importance of the relationship between freedom of belief and security – particularly in light of the terrorist events on 11 September 2001 in the United States. As the states, religions and cultures of the Central Asian region transform, this nexus plays an increasingly important factor in the area’s stability. These transformations are played out in the context of globalization, tolerance and observance of international standards are important for the cross-fertilization of ideas and values.

As Islam encompasses more aspects of one’s lifestyle than other religions, it is frequently perceived to be a political religion and often mis-associated with extremism and terrorism. This is also heightened by the fact that Muslims in many regions are seeking to modernize Islam in order to re-define its relationship vis a vis the governments. There is often misinformation surrounding the distinction between a state religion and a religious-based government. Thus, when one speaks about religiously-based political parties, there is a tendency to equate them with extremism as they are perceived to be seeking a change of the political system as part of the modernizing process. Moreover, often religiously-motivated conflicts are portrayed to

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that not all topics were evenly covered during the discussions. Thus, the absence of a particular theme does not imply that it is of lesser importance. The discussions reflect issues, in which there were a diversity of opinions and were restricted by a limited amount of time to thoroughly explore many issues - Editor.

be in the name of religion, whereas in actually, they are in the interests of a particular group, which uses religion as a tool of mobilization.

The experience in Tajikistan, however, demonstrates the capacity for political Islam to serve as a stabilizing factor in the post-civil war peace talks as all major viewpoints were included into the peace-building process. In the example of Tajikistan, inclusion of a religious-based political party has meant that religion is a part of the state-building process rather than acting counter to this course. Participants from Kyrgyzstan were divided on this topic as officially, religiously-based political parties are prohibited. Those preferring their prohibition contended that religious based political parties could lead to a domination of one religion over another. They also cited organizations such as “Hizbut-Tahrir,” which is considered to be an extremist organization by the government, as threats to internal security if registered. Others, favoring the registration of non-violent religious parties asserted that they have such a right to express their freedom of belief and that security is better protected when such organizations are included into the system, rather than excluded.

The freedom to proselytize and the role of missionaries reflected – in part – the extent of a country’s transition to democracy. In societies undergoing the transformation, religion often plays an important function as a unifying factor. As the newly independent nation-states of Central Asia continue the process of identity-building and pluralistic development, their burdened societies are occasionally unprepared to accept or absorb the activities of missionaries, who are actively attempting to influence these processes. Moreover, a lack of understanding and confidence exacerbates intolerant attitudes. In some instances, these tensions have risen into open conflicts in small communities in which several members converted to non-traditional faiths such as in Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyzstan in early 2001.

It was noted that it is important to foster tolerant attitudes in order to promote inter-confessional dialogue. The right to observe one’s religion and/or belief is thoroughly ingrained in international standards. The forms in which one’s belief can manifest itself are many and include the right to proselytize and disseminate information about one’s religion. Observance of international standards regarding the rights to freedom of belief and expression are important stepping-stones to guaranteeing peace and security as they strengthen tolerance and protect the ability to express not only one’s belief, but one’s opinion and personal identity as well. One participant paralleled the intolerant attitudes today towards missionaries with inter-racial intolerance in the United States and the steps, which were – and are being – taken to erase racism.

Restrictive legislation in several states of the region has prevented the full manifestation of the right to freedom of belief and expression for several non-traditional religions. For example, the quota of at least 45 people before a religion can be registered in Kazakhstan was perceived to be excessive as several organizations, such as the Jehova’s Witnesses, were not able to register in all the communities with their representatives; nor are they able to register in Turkmenistan due to restrictive policies. While Kyrgyzstan has been generally more open to registering non-traditional (in the region) religions, its refusal to register certain religious organizations on the grounds that they are politically based also generated widespread discussion. Similar considerations were raised regarding Uzbekistan.

Information about the work of international organizations and international standards is important in order to protect one's freedom of belief and expression. Firstly, it is necessary to educate religious and civic leaders, government personnel and media, *inter alia* on rights and standards regarding freedom of belief and expression. Moreover, international organizations should be more active working in partnership with local non-governmental organizations and religious leaders to promote tolerance and inter-confessional dialogue.