

OPEN DOORS INTERNATIONAL

Human Dimension Implementation meeting
Warsaw, 7 October 2008

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE OSCE REGION

Moderator, distinguished guests,

Thank you for giving me the floor.

Open Doors International is advocating for full freedom of religion or belief worldwide although we are concentrating our efforts in those countries where Christians are persecuted.

Open Doors is partnering with other faith groups in inter-faith platforms in the Netherlands, in Brussels, and elsewhere in the world as we strongly believe that all people holding religious convictions are the first stakeholders of this precious human right. However, freedom of religion or belief affects the core of all of us, whether we adhere to a religion or belief or not.

We acknowledge the OSCE commitments and the efforts of many of you at the table in promoting human rights. However, there is still a lot of work to do. That is why we appreciate the time set apart today to discuss freedom of religion or belief in the OSCE region.

In alphabetical order, I will start with **Kazakhstan**. Kazakhstan will be the OSCE chair in office in 2010. This is a wonderful opportunity to show that you take human rights seriously and to give a shining example to the other countries in the region.

One point of concern is the new religion law in Kazakhstan penalising 'unauthorised' religious activities. This affects Muslims, Jehovah Witnesses, Hare Krishna's, and evangelical Protestants. The new law is further restricting the already tight provisions on religious activities in the country. It seems like the Kazakh authorities treat religious groups as a threat rather than an asset to society.

In **Turkmenistan**, religious communities face serious obstacles in the free practice of religion. Registration requirements are difficult to meet and the process is far from transparent. Any unregistered religious activity, including

people meeting together for worship in private homes, is banned and the consequences for breaching the law are serious.

A new president took office in Turkmenistan last year. We hope that he will stop actions denying freedom of thought, conscience and belief to peaceful Turkmen citizens of all faiths.

In **Uzbekistan**, numerous restrictions are impeding the ability of religious communities to operate freely. This affects all non-traditional faith groups in the country. Penalties on illegal religious practice are high.

Pentecostal preacher Dimitry Shestakov from the city of Andijan has been sentenced to four years labour camp for illegal religious practice in March 2007. His bible studies and other religious activities were seen as inciting religious hatred, hurting the feeling of other faith groups and a threat to national unity. Dimitry is currently in Navoy prison camp, more than 800 kilometres from his house and family.

States can limit the public exercise of religious freedom indeed, but only in a limited number of cases and for a limited period of time. I fail to see how this would apply to the case of Dimitry Shestakov.

I therefore very much agree with what was said earlier by the Netherlands Helsinki federation.

Distinguished delegates, with these examples from just a few OSCE countries, I can only encourage you to review your legislation and practice to make sure that you all live up to your obligations as an OSCE member state.

Finally, may I kindly urge you all to stop talking about religious groups and start to discuss with them on all the issues of your concern. You might very well be astonished by their patriotism and loyalty to your country.