



United States Mission to the OSCE

Religious Freedom in Kazakhstan

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
April 11, 2013

The United States welcomes Kazakhstani State Secretary Marat Tazhin's recent affirmation of the Government of Kazakhstan's commitment to the protection of the rights of members of all ethnic groups, particularly members of minorities with their own culture, language and traditions. It is in this spirit that we urge Kazakhstan to ensure the protection of the rights of adherents of all religious groups.

Kazakhstan has a rich tradition of religious tolerance and the vast majority of Kazakhstani faithful worship without interference from the government. However, the United States is concerned that the religious legislation adopted in 2011, which introduced new requirements for religious registration and restrictions on missionary activity and the importation and distribution of religious literature, falls short of upholding Kazakhstan's international obligations and commitments regarding freedom of religion. We are also concerned that these restrictions often disproportionately affect those individuals belonging to small minority groups as well as religious communities the government deems non-traditional to Kazakhstan.

We note with particular concern the de facto requirement that all Islamic communities must join the Sunni Hanafi Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan to meet the government's registration requirement. In doing so, these communities give up 30 percent of their income and the right to appoint their own imam. This has left those that do not wish to join the Spiritual Administration, either for ideological or practical reasons, without the opportunity to obtain legal status. Additionally, the Spiritual Administration's requirement that all services be conducted in Kazakh disadvantages members of ethnic minorities that would traditionally worship in their own language.

When governments unduly restrict religious freedom and freedom of expression, and when societies fail to take steps to promote tolerance and curb discrimination based on religious identity, they risk alienating religious believers and emboldening extremists. We urge the government of Kazakhstan to uphold the obligations and commitments it has made to protect freedom of religion.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.