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**Statement at the 2010 OSCE Review Conference:
Working Session 2
Freedom of religion or belief:
States should safeguard equal rights for so-called traditional
and non-traditional religious groups**

Threats to freedom of religion or belief exist in many OSCE participating states. During 2009 and 2010, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, in partnership with other Norwegian organizations,¹ documented such threats in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This statement is on behalf of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the International Partnership for Human Rights.

We found that, in Kazakhstan, serious violations include: attacks on religious freedom by officials ranging from President Nursultan Nazarbaev down to local officials; literature censorship; state-sponsored encouragement of religious intolerance; legal restrictions on freedom of religion or belief; raids, interrogations, threats and fines affecting both registered and unregistered religious communities and individuals; unfair trials; the jailing of a few particularly disfavored religious believers; restrictions on the social and charitable work of religious communities; close police and KGB secret police surveillance of religious communities; and attempts to deprive religious communities of their property.

These practices stand in stark contrast to Kazakhstan's portraying itself as a multi-religious, multi-ethnic tolerant society and state, "an oasis of religious accord". Indeed, there is a tradition of tolerance in Kazakhstan, but it does not seem to include *non-traditional* religious groups, such as independent Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, most Protestants, Hare Krishna and Jehovah's Witnesses. Such groups are dubbed 'sects' or worse.

In Kyrgyzstan, violations of freedom of religion or belief increased – in both law and practice – under President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. A harsh new Religion Law was adopted in 2009, despite international protests. The Law requires all religious communities to re-register, bars communities not registered from receiving legal status, and bars those with fewer than 200 members from registering. The law also prohibits the involvement of minors in religious organizations (Article 4), and prohibits the conversion of citizens from one religion to another (proselytism) (Article 5).

There is hope that the current and future leadership in Kyrgyzstan will refrain from further measures undermining fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, but the direction of future state policy remains unclear.

¹ The organisations are: Forum 18 News Service, the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights and the Norwegian Mission to the East.

- In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, current legislation on religion should be amended in order to ensure compliance with international human rights standards.
- In particular, current requirements of state registration functions as a way of banning or limiting religious activities, and should be repealed.
- The authorities should stop using the ‘extremist’ threat to justify attacks on the peaceful exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Relevant research indicates that repression boosts extremism, while respect for human rights and efforts to nurture the development of an active civil society contributes to preventing violent extremism.

In discussions with authorities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan about policies and legislation that restrict fundamental freedoms, it is often stated that there also are problems in Norway, as well as in other Western countries. We agree on this, although problems here are of a different scale.

A recent publication, *Believing in Norway*, available at the Norwegian Helsinki Committee website, discusses some of the most important problems with respect to ensuring freedom of religion in Norway. Let us end this statement by a quotation from this report:

“Issues on the role of religion in society and state and the extent of religious freedoms remain contentious in Norway as well as in many other states. Often debates on these issues focus narrowly on the Norwegian context and history, underlining the need of defending Norwegian traditions which are seen as threatened by refugees and immigrants bringing foreign religions and cultures with them.

According to our view, the debates need to be enriched by reference to a wider international and human rights context, including reflections on challenges resulting from globalization, on how to define the most important principles at stake as well as on how to adapt relevant international legal and political standards to these issues.”