

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN KAZAKHSTAN

STATEMENT BY THE RELIGIOUS CENTRE OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

For the OSCE Human Dimension Sessions of the 2010 Review Conference, Astana, 26-28 November, 2010

In our oral statement at the Human Dimension Meeting in Warsaw last year, we reported that a serious interference with our peaceful religious activity in **KAZAKHSTAN** had been resolved with the assistance of different governmental organs, including the Presidential Commission on Human Rights, the Prosecutor General's Office and the Ombudsman's Office. A letter of the Committee of Religious Affairs (CRA) making the unfounded claim that our magazines present a "potential threat for the security of the state" had been cancelled. Our religious magazines—*The Watchtower* and *Awake!*—have a worldwide monthly circulation of over 70 million copies in more than 180 languages, including Kazakh, and threaten no one.

Unfortunately, on 23 September 2009, we received another letter, in which the CRA on its own initiative requested copies of all publicly distributed issues of *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines for the year 2009. The purpose of this request was to conduct another expert study, and the requested magazines were provided to the CRA. Thus, notwithstanding the assurances of the CRA during the meeting of the OSCE in Warsaw in 2009 that this "misunderstanding" would be quickly resolved, **the adversarial examination of our magazines continues.**

In fact, on 31 October 2009, the CRA officially requested from our Religious Center copies of all "study editions" of *The Watchtower* for 2009, to once again submit them to experts for examination. These issues of the magazines were provided to the CRA on 5 November 2009. The expert study continues to this day. In their letters to the Religious Center dated 13 May, 28 June, and 8 September 2010 the CRA informed us that "the religious expert examination of the magazines that you provided would be conducted within the third quarter of 2010." In our letter dated October 27 we requested from the CRA upon conclusion of the expert study to provide us with the questions stated before the experts and with copies of the expert conclusions themselves. The CRA with its November 12 letter answered that they are examining our publications for worship upon request of the Almaty regional administration as "the items of foreign mass media", and "when the expert examination will be finished the expert conclusion will be sent to this agency."

According to the Rules of Conducting Religious Expert Examinations (approved by the Governmental Decree of 1 January 2007 No. 70), the expert examination must be completed within 30 calendar days from the day when the expert is given the object of examination. The examination period may be extended for 30 calendar days in the case of the necessity to study additional materials and information in order to conduct the examination. Hence, the maximum examination period allowed by law is 60 calendar days, which period has already long expired in the case of this repeat expert study.

The grounds for the undertaking of this expert examination in themselves appear questionable. Disregarding the fact that the CRA itself cancelled in 2009 its own results of the expert study of our religious literature, it initiated a second one. Such actions could be considered as a discriminatory form of censorship either of religious texts for worship or of "foreign mass media". Either way such an approach is illegal according to articles 14 (prohibition of discrimination) and 20 (freedom of speech and press; censorship shall be prohibited) of the Republic of Kazakhstan's Constitution. This ongoing examination of our religious literature violates the right of Jehovah's Witnesses to freely practice our religion and our freedom of worship.

We appeal to the authorities of Kazakhstan *to take positive actions to resolve the problems with the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses in order to avoid illegal harassment and administrative prosecutions of*

peaceful Christians and their registered Local Religious Organizations in Kazakhstan under the guise of protection against extremism.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of Kazakhstan in order to clarify any misunderstanding and to promote a constructive dialogue.
