

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN KYRGYZSTAN

ORAL STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF
JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 24 September to 5 October 2012

At last year's meeting, we mentioned the case of two young men, Iskandar Kambarov and Jonibek Nosirov. They had been imprisoned on false charges in May 2011. Happily, nine months later they were released. We would like to express our gratitude for this positive outcome. Sadly, this positive development is overshadowed by other situations that are of serious concern.

Jehovah's Witnesses have enjoyed national registration since 1998. Approximately 40 local religious organizations were registered under the previous religion law. On December 31, 2008 a new religion law was enacted, requiring new religious organizations to be made up of at least 200 founding members and that the local city council must "approve" the list of founding members. In the autumn of 2010, Jehovah's Witnesses applied under the new religion law for registration of three religious organizations in the Osh, Naryn, and Jalal-Abad districts. Their applications included all required documents. Surprisingly, the Osh, Naryn, and Jalal-Abad city councils rejected the applications arguing a lack of any direction from the Government regarding approving the lists of members. As a consequence, the State Committee on Religious Affairs refused to grant registration to these local communities of Jehovah's Witnesses. The result? Two years have passed, with multiple court hearings, but registration has still not been granted.

Some citizens in Kyrgyzstan face another difficulty: although the country offers a type of "alternative service" in place of military service, this service includes making monetary contributions to a special account of the Ministry of Defense. It is obvious that if someone refuses to perform military service because of his Bible-trained conscience, he would hardly accept to directly finance military activities. This is the case of many Jehovah's Witnesses of military age. They have been convicted for "evading" alternative service although they are willing to pay the stipulated amount to another government department or to the general revenue fund of the Kyrgyz Republic. For instance, on 20 March 2012, the Supreme Court of the Kyrgyz Republic upheld the criminal convictions imposed on Milan Nasrytdinov, Adilet Bayakunov, and Talas Nyazmambetov, three of Jehovah's Witnesses for "evading" alternative service.

Another sad fact is mob violence: In May 2010 and again in May 2012, mobs attacked and beat Jehovah's Witnesses living in Toktogul, stole their personal possessions, destroyed their homes, and then demolished their place of worship. According to witnesses, these mobs were led by a senior employee of the Toktogul City Council. Although more than two years has passed, no one has been charged for the May 2010 attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses in Toktogul, although the perpetrators are known by the local officials. We are pleased to report, however, that the prosecutor's office has charged the persons responsible for the May 2012 attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses in Toktogul, which includes a senior employee of the Toktogul City Council. Furthermore, in June, 2012, the State Committee on Religious Affairs issued a decision to withdraw the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in Toktogul, although they are the innocent victims of the attacks. We are pleased to report that on August 29, 2012, the Bishkek Interdistrict Court declared that decision to be illegal and a violation of the Constitution and ICCPR.

More information can be found on the written statement that has been posted on the OSCE website.

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the government of Kyrgyzstan to register local religious organizations, and to offer an alternative civilian service that does not require conscientious objectors to make monetary payments directly to the Ministry of Defense, and to protect them from physical harassment and the destruction of their places of worship.

Yesterday, we had a positive meeting with the representatives of the Kyrgyz delegation. We were told that these situations would find a solution soon through a dialogue with them. We look forward to the opportunity to convey this good news.