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**STATEMENT BY MR. YERALY TUGZHANOV,
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AFFAIRS OF THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE OF THE REPUBLIC OF
KAZAKHSTAN, AT THE OSCE CONFERENCE ON COMBATING
DISCRIMINATION AND PROMOTING MUTUAL
RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING**

Bucharest, 7 and 8 June 2007

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Conference Participants,

Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional State located in the very centre of Eurasia. Our country plays a significant role in bringing east and west together and in the dialogue of civilizations. In his annual address to the people of Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev emphasized that “it is now essential to move towards a new role for Kazakhstan as one of the important international centres of intercultural and interconfessional dialogue”.

In my statement at this high-level conference, I should like to call to your attention the experience of Kazakhstan in ensuring dialogue between cultures and religions, which is of undoubted interest to the international community. Our model of inter-ethnic and interconfessional harmony is Kazakhstan’s contribution to the worldwide process of combating discrimination and promoting mutual respect and understanding.

Today representatives of more than 100 ethnic groups live in our country, and there are more than 40 different religious confessions and denominations. The number of religious associations has increased almost fivefold since the country gained its independence in 1991 and there are now 3,855 such associations. Islam accounts for 2,144 of these religious associations, the Russian Orthodox Church for 270, the Roman Catholic Church for 95 and Protestant associations for 1,147. In addition, Kazakhstan is home to 27 religious associations representing Judaism, four representing Buddhism, 49 representing non-traditional religions in Kazakhstan as well as various charitable religious foundations and other societies.

There are long-established friendly relations between the principal religions — Islam and the Orthodox Church. Kurban Ait (Eid al-Adha) and Christmas are officially recognized holidays in recognition of the role that Islam and Christianity play in the culture of our people. There is no antagonism between the representatives of other religions.

Kazakhstan, which is located in the heart of a troubled region, is currently recognized as an oasis of stability and religious harmony. The stabilizing role that our country plays in Central Asia is held in high regard by the world community.

The State does not accept the politicization of any religion or the establishment of political parties or other movements on the basis of religion. It is difficult for manifestations of xenophobia, religious discrimination and anti-Semitism to take root in our country. In this connection, the Chief Rabbi of Kazakhstan Yeshaya Cohen has emphasized that “to date Kazakhstan remains the only republic to have emerged from the entire former Soviet Union that is free from wars and conflicts. Inter-ethnic and interconfessional relations are developing in a normal civilized manner in Kazakhstan”.

A legislative framework has been established in Kazakhstan to ensure equality of rights and freedoms of citizens regardless of their ethnic group or religious affiliation.

Barely a month after it achieved its independence, the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted a law on freedom of conscience and religious associations. Our legislation is recognized by international experts as the most liberal in the entire post-Soviet area. At the same time, the practical application of this law and the emergence of new phenomena with respect to religion and the State point to a need to improve the legislation in accordance with international standards.

The Ministry of Justice of Kazakhstan has initiated work on a draft law. In this connection, we will, of course, call on the opinions of religious leaders, academics and the public. Work to elaborate proposals for the improvement of legislation is being carried out in co-operation with representatives of the OSCE and the International Helsinki Committee in Kazakhstan. A joint meeting was held on this subject in Astana on 25 May. In addition, the law enforcement system operates effectively in Kazakhstan and the work of the law enforcement agencies ensures the prevention of all forms of discrimination and xenophobia. Naturally, refugees and unemployed people from other post-Soviet countries create certain risks. On the whole, according to the Association of Sociologists and Political Scientists of Kazakhstan, 98 per cent of the population reject the possibility of conflict in the country.

Since 1992, on the initiative of the President, a day of spiritual harmony has been held every year in Kazakhstan to strengthen tolerance and trust between the peoples of the world. Last year, our closest neighbours — a delegation consisting of deputies of the State Duma of Russia and delegates from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan — came to Astana to participate in a forum along with the heads of the Ukrainian, Austrian, German and Swiss branches of the international association Peace through Culture. This year, this event will mark its 15th anniversary.

The visit by Pope John Paul II to our country in September 2001 was in recognition of Kazakhstan’s contribution to the preservation of stability in relations between religions. One of the most respected figures in the modern world offered sincere words of gratitude to the people of Kazakhstan for helping maintain peace and spiritual harmony.

Kazakhstan has become a place of dialogue between religions. This is demonstrated by the fact that the two Congresses of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions were held in Astana in 2003 and 2006. The congress in 2003 was attended by 17 delegations representing various religious denominations, and 29 delegations from 43 countries took part in the second congress. The delegates were not only leaders of religious denominations but also academics and political actors in Europe and Asia, and leaders and representatives from prominent international organizations, including the United Nations, the OSCE and

UNESCO. The humanitarian ideas of the forum made an enormous contribution to the strengthening of mutual understanding among nations.

The Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan — a unique tool for agreeing on national interests — is working well in our country. In providing all the different peoples with an opportunity for the revival of their language and culture, religions promote stability and harmony within society. The Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan includes leaders of the main confessions. It is largely thanks to this Assembly that it has been possible to turn multi-ethnicity to our advantage and to avoid xenophobia. The different ethnic groups living in our country also have an important mission — to act as a bridge within the framework of cultural dialogue between Kazakhstan and other countries.

The draft law presented by the Head of State on 18 May this year on the introduction of amendments and additions to the Constitution of Kazakhstan marks a new stage in the democratization of our country. With his proposal that Parliament should contain representatives of the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan, the President has begun a new stage in development of this unique institution. This status is to be consolidated so that it can participate in State decision-making. In this question, we have drawn on the experience of other countries, in particular Romania's model of inter-ethnic harmony, in which it is obligatory to have one deputy in Parliament representing each ethnic group. This once again shows that respect for every citizen regardless of their ethnic group or faith remains a supreme value in Kazakhstan.

For the first time in the history of Kazakhstan, an authorized State agency — the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Justice — was established in 2005 to guarantee the rights of citizens to freedom of conscience and to strengthen the climate of mutual understanding and tolerance among representatives of different religions.

Peace and stability do not come about on their own; they are the result of day-to-day systematic work. The media play a major role in the promotion of tolerance and the combating of xenophobia and religious discrimination. Sometimes the media highlight negative developments in the criminal world or everyday life as well as violations of national legislation, interpreting these as conflict in the interreligious or inter-ethnic spheres. It is important for the media and society to resolve problems of this kind in accordance with the law rather than being guided by emotions, and to act exclusively within the framework of the law. As our Head of State, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has emphasized “freedom of speech in any democratic State does not mean an absence of control and does not nullify the responsibility of the media towards society”.

In this connection, the Committee believes it necessary to pay particular attention to work with the media. With a view to implementing the final documents of the second Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, the State television channels regularly show programmes on religion — “Under the Sign of Wisdom” and “*Kumbez*” (“Cupola”). In the Palace of Peace and Accord, which was specially built according to plans by the world-famous architect Norman Foster for the second Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, lectures are to be given by respected religious figures, and these will be given wide coverage by the media.

I should like to conclude my statement with the words of the great Kazakh thinker Abaya, who said that “labour, knowledge and the art of understanding others lie at the heart of spiritual self-improvement, which results in a good name, word and deed”.

Thank you for your attention.