

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN UZBEKISTAN

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

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For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 24 September to 5 October 2012. 1 October 2012

Uzbekistan is known as a beautiful country with a unique culture and Uzbek people are justly proud of what they usually call their "tradition of eastern hospitality".

The beauty and hospitality of this country—which has the potential to attract many tourists and businesses—is marred by Uzbekistan's persecution of its citizens who are Jehovah's Witnesses. Except for the one town of Chirchick, their worship is forbidden everywhere else in the country. Despite numerous attempts to obtain registration, particularly in Tashkent, officials have refused to grant Jehovah's Witnesses registration.

What is the penalty in Uzbekistan for studying the Bible in a private home or for talking about peaceful religious beliefs to a neighbor? For three family men, one of them a medical doctor and father of three small children, it meant a 3 ½ to 4 years sentence in a labor camp. At the completion of their sentences, two of these were ordered to remain imprisoned for several additional months. They were finally released in May of this year.

What of the third man—35 year-old Abdubannob Akhmedov? His 4-year prison term was to end in July 2012. However, just one month before he was to be released he was sentenced to another 2 ½ years on the false charge that he violated prison routine rules. Just a week ago, on September 18, his cassation appeal about the additional prison term was denied by the Navoi Regional court.

The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses has continued in recent months. Uzbek police raided personal homes in search of Bible literature and tried to force confessions for so-called "illegal religious activity." After one recent court conviction, a 54-year-old female pediatrician was convicted because of her religion. She was ordered to pay a huge fine and her passport was confiscated. In the past year alone, more than 90 Jehovah's Witnesses both men and women have been arrested and convicted for peacefully exercising their freedom of religion. Most have received massive fines amounting to hundreds or thousands of Euros each. Some have been deported. Others have been imprisoned usually for periods lasting several days to two weeks.

You can find more detailed information on these and other oppressive events on the written statement that has been posted on the OSCE website.

We respectfully request the government of Uzbekistan to stop the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses by granting amnesty to peaceful members of this faith who are still held in prisons, and by approving registration applications for congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses, which would eliminate the fines, harsh treatments and prison sentences.

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