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**WELCOMING ADDRESS BY THE
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN,
MR. NURSULTAN NAZARBAEV, AT THE OPENING SESSION OF
THE OSCE TOLERANCE IMPLEMENTATION MEETING ON
PROMOTING INTER-CULTURAL, INTER-RELIGIOUS AND
INTER-ETHNIC UNDERSTANDING**

Almaty, 12 June 2006

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to welcome you all to Kazakhstan. I see some familiar faces in the hall. I am delighted to have this opportunity to meet with you again now in the city of Almaty, which is hosting one of the most important OSCE events of 2006.

As you are aware, the idea of holding a conference on inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding came from Kazakhstan. I am very pleased that the OSCE supported our initiative.

The discussions taking place in the world on this subject are extremely serious, since recent events have provided convincing proof that current opinions regarding the need to form a new security paradigm based on maintaining an effective dialogue of cultures in a climate of diversity in terms of ethnic and religious traditions and values are justified.

We must recognize that in today's world the importance of tolerance has grown considerably as one of the dominating factors of stability, especially within the processes of globalization that are forever picking up speed and in view of the emergence of new challenges to stability.

I therefore believe that ensuring harmony among religions and the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups is the most relevant leitmotif of long-term security.

We are all witnessing how mechanisms created by the international community to counter the changing threats to peace are being tested for their durability. Now they have been joined by attempts to divide the world according to the principle of the difference of civilizations, for these have become a reality. There are systematic efforts to pit one view of the world against another, something which is fraught with the risk of tension and at times open confrontation.

How effective are the measures being taken? Are the instruments for maintaining stability good enough? How do we avoid a repetition of the events that literally blew up the

Muslim world at the start of the year following the irresponsible actions of a number of publications?

Our conference must try to find answers to these and other questions.

The OSCE's mandate as a Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian organization is to prevent the emergence of crises at an early stage and ensure post-conflict rehabilitation.

As for the question how effectively this is being done, there are several points of view — what is more, sometimes conflicting ones. Nevertheless I believe that the potential of the OSCE, which was established 31 years ago as a unique forum for dialogue, remains high in spite of everything. It is precisely the OSCE that can make a more valuable contribution than any other international organization to the settlement of existing problems, problems which we have gathered here in Almaty to discuss now.

I believe that the results of the Almaty conference should form the basis of a mechanism for OSCE action in this area, the need for the elaboration of which is currently becoming ever clearer.

Traditionally it is thought that the OSCE's strengths lie in those areas that have to do with what is known as the "human dimension". However, it is no secret that the humanitarian dimension is connected primarily with the OSCE's democratization activities, with ensuring human rights and freedoms.

At the same time, inter-confessional and inter-ethnic concord represents a cornerstone in the edifice of comprehensive security, stability, and progressive economic and political development.

Kazakhstan's experience is the best possible evidence of this. It is precisely for this reason that our country, as an active participant in the OSCE, feels it is its duty to contribute to the consolidation of experience and practical knowledge which can be used in co-operation among all the Organization's participating States with a view to strengthening security.

In a climate of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity (I might recall that there are 100 ethnic groups belonging to 46 religious denominations in Kazakhstan), tolerance has become a decisive factor in ensuring peace and stability and Kazakhstan's economic progress, which continues to amaze the world.

For us the principle of tolerance is not only the norm of political culture but it is also one of the key principles of Statehood, which we are supporting and strengthening in a most decisive way.

It is a pleasure to be the leader of a country where people are united by a common understanding of the supreme value of unshakable friendship and the fraternity of all peoples and religious denominations of Kazakhstan.

In the centuries-old culture of the Kazakh people, tolerance is considered to be a behavioural norm and a perfectly natural principle. It is precisely for that reason that everyone born in Kazakhstan considers this land to be his own.

In our totalitarian past, you can find examples of how countless representatives of the most diverse peoples living on the territory of the former Soviet Union were forcibly transferred to Kazakhstan. In addition, a large number of settlers came voluntarily, in search of a better future. They all found shelter here and were grateful to the land that accepted them.

In the United States of America there is a holiday called “Thanksgiving”, which commemorates how a family of American Indians saved a family of white settlers from starvation. We have the day of the unity of the peoples of Kazakhstan, which we celebrate on 1 May.

As you probably know, since the first years of independence the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan has been operating in the country; this has become the most important element in the country’s political system and it has underpinned the interests of all ethnic groups.

During these years, a legal basis was established, which formed the basis of the country’s inter-ethnic policy, guaranteeing strict observance of human rights and freedoms regardless of an individual’s ethnic group or religious affiliation.

As Head of State and Chairman of the Assembly, I cannot remember any occasion when we did not consult with the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan and take its opinion into account when adopting important State decisions.

A most important strategic task has been resolved in Kazakhstan, namely that of creating the most favourable conditions possible for meeting the needs of national minorities relating to ethnic culture and religious identity.

The most important of these concern culture, education and preservation of one’s mother tongue. An optimal system has been put into place in Kazakhstan for maintaining inter-ethnic harmony, the ruling principle of which is dialogue between society and the State. I believe that our experience might be of interest to the entire OSCE community.

It is in fact that idea that was behind our initiative to assume the Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2009, something which we are systematically and purposefully moving towards.

What goals would we set ourselves if we were to lead the OSCE? I will highlight the most important ones.

First, the international community has recognized that, in pursuing a policy which might imaginatively be called “stability investment” in Central Asia, Kazakhstan represents a guarantee of regional security.

We see our main task as a regional leader in helping to ensure genuine and long-term security in Central Asia, including Afghanistan.

In the long term, all this is aimed at securing peace in our region and making life more prosperous, more certain and more peaceful for the people living in Central Asia.

Second, we are guided by the goal of increasing the importance of Kazakhstan as a unique bridge between East and West in the dialogue of civilizations, something which we

are consistently in favour of maintaining. Kazakhstan is prepared to invest its own practical experience and knowledge, making use of unique Kazakh know-how.

Third, as you all know, we have begun to implement an ambitious State programme aimed at having Kazakhstan join the world's top 50 most competitive countries in the medium term. I am grateful to the leaders of the leading world powers for their support of our initiative and I should like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to them for their willingness to help realize it in full.

I regard the success of our project regarding Kazakhstan's Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2009 as one of the stages in this task. After all, competitive ability is not only a question of high economic indices and intensive participation in the global distribution of labour. Just as important is the task of forming an optimum political structure that will ensure the best possible functioning of the State and protect human rights and freedoms.

The choice in favour of a democracy which takes into account the experience of leading Eastern and Western powers was the only possible choice for Kazakhstan. We do not, however, have established democratic principles. For that reason, we are obliged to move forward gradually, on a trial and error basis. We believe the most important thing is dynamic movement in active co-operation with the OSCE, whose values and standards Kazakhstan shares.

Fourth, as an active participant in the OSCE, Kazakhstan feels great responsibility for the future of the Organization, which is passing through a difficult period. The voice of the newly independent States should be loud and clear in the OSCE. Together we must strengthen the potential of the OSCE so that it fully meets the interests of all participating States.

On the basis of the points I have already mentioned, I believe that the idea of Kazakhstan assuming the Chairmanship of the OSCE is in keeping with the main priorities of my homeland's domestic and foreign policy and also with the principles advocated by the Organization itself.

Allow me to say a few words about the socio-economic and political characteristics of modern-day Kazakhstan.

The national economy continues to develop at great speed. Average annual growth over the past five years has remained at 10 per cent and is one of the highest rates in the world. The per capita gross domestic product increased more than 30 per cent during the past three years. By 2008, we will have doubled this figure in comparison to the year 2000 and trebled it by 2015.

Kazakhstan's economy has a clear social bias. We are confidently moving towards the construction of a genuine social State like that of the most developed countries in the East and West.

Since 2003, Kazakhstan has been implementing an innovative industrial strategy aimed at diversification of the economy, development of goods manufacturing and services with high added value, and creation of the bases for a high-tech service economy. We are

successfully moving away from an economy based on raw materials, something which most of the main exporters of raw materials and natural energy resources cannot boast of.

Thanks to successful reforms, we have painlessly entered a new stage of socio-economic modernization and political democratization of Kazakhstan.

Large-scale reforms have been continuing in Kazakhstan with a view to increasing the effectiveness of the State structure. The time-frame for future reforms has been clearly defined. Beginning this year, they will be conducted in two stages lasting until 2012. By that time, Kazakhstan's political system will for the most part be in keeping with the legal principles governing the functioning of prosperous democratic States but will also take account of the most important cultural and historical features and traditions of our society.

Under my leadership, the State Commission on Democratization is in charge of the elaboration of a conceptual programme of reforms. This Commission is made up of respected politicians, public figures and academics representing an entire spectrum of views.

Kazakhstan is pursuing an active and energetic foreign policy which is recognized around the globe as being in accord with the highest principles of peace, decency and justice. We are consistently developing genuine partnership and friendly relations with all countries in the belief that there can be no alternative to the principle of integration in today's interdependent world. For that reason, Kazakhstan is most resolute in its support of the work of integration associations, in which it plays and will continue to play a most active role.

Kazakhstan was an initiator of and is an active participant in the Eurasian Economic Community and the Common Economic Space, which bring together the States of our region. A meeting of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization is to be held on 15 July of this year. Our country will do everything possible to ensure that this important Asian organization becomes a core element in economic co-operation and the fight against extremism.

It will be a great honour for Kazakhstan to host the summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, a dynamically developing international body which shares many goals and tasks with the OSCE. We are impatiently awaiting the start of the work of the second Congress of Leaders of Traditional and World Religions, which will be held this autumn in our new capital — Astana — a city that has become a symbol of the dynamic changes taking place in Kazakhstan.

Distinguished conference participants,

It is very important that the results of our work meet the expectations of the participating States and make it possible to identify effective mechanisms for maintaining stability and an atmosphere of harmony throughout the OSCE area. This is especially relevant today when inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts are becoming one of the most urgent international problems.

I wish you every success in your work and a pleasant stay in my country.

Thank you.