

**RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN AZERBAIJAN,  
KAZAKHSTAN, TURKMENISTAN AND UZBEKISTAN**  
ORAL STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S  
CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

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Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Religious Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in **KAZAKHSTAN** has been registered as a religious association since January 1997. Overall Jehovah's Witnesses are grateful to be able to carry on their worship peacefully without official interference. However, the Atyrau Region remains the only region where Jehovah's Witnesses are not officially registered. Over the past six years, four unsuccessful attempts have been made to obtain registration in that Region, resulting in disruption to religious services. The Prosecutor's Office has even prosecuted Jehovah's Witnesses for practicing their religion!

In **AZERBAIJAN** a disturbing pattern of police interference with religious meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses has been developing in Baku. Police have used deceit or force to enter the private homes where the religious meetings have been held and have harassed, detained, and fined those in attendance at these meetings, despite the fact that the Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses is registered in Baku. On December 24, 2006, armed police raided a meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses being held in a rented building. Further details are available in our written submission.

In **TURKMENISTAN** Jehovah's Witnesses are not registered and all efforts to meet with the registration authorities have been rebuffed. April 2007 was reported to be the most difficult period in a long time. There were arrests all over the country and a number of Jehovah's Witnesses were summoned to police stations and to appear before the local administration. Reportedly, the Ministry of National Security has Jehovah's Witnesses on its agenda because of the lack of registration. Jehovah's Witnesses who still work at state agencies are being pressured to leave their jobs and many have been dismissed or have had their contracts discontinued merely because their religion is not registered by the State. We are hopeful that addressing the registration issue would open the way to further progress and put an end to illegal fines, unwarranted searches and police violence.

Jehovah's Witnesses in **UZBEKISTAN** appreciated that they were able to hold the annual celebration of Christ death in April without major interference or arrests. Unfortunately, in the following months their situation has again worsened. Although there are various congregations and groups of Jehovah's Witnesses in different regions of Uzbekistan, including Tashkent, the only remaining registration in Chirchik is now challenged. In cities where Jehovah's Witnesses have been refused registration, like Samarkand, serious problems have developed. In that city, two Jehovah's Witnesses, Irfon Khamidov and Delafroz Arziyeva, face two years of punishment for teaching religion. Irfon Khamidov has been imprisoned since May 14 of this year. The police and National Security Service have raided homes of Jehovah's Witnesses, confiscated religious literature, and verbally and physically abused Witnesses and non-Witnesses who were simply attending a peaceful religious meeting. There are over 1,100 documented cases of Jehovah's Witnesses having been arrested, detained, fined, or beaten.

More details are available in our Written submissions. In the meantime, we appeal to the authorities of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan *to take positive actions in order to resolve registration problems.*

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