March 25, 2002: New Religion Law Would Take Kazakhstan in the Wrong Direction

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March 25, 2002Contact:
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WASHINGTON - A new religion law awaiting presidential signature would move Kazakhstan away from democracy and reform, says the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress. In a letter sent Friday to Assistant Secretary of State Elizabeth Jones, the Commission urges the U.S. government to make clear to the government of Kazakhstan its "great concern" about the proposed law, which would allow the government to ban unregistered religious groups while making it difficult to register and to deny registration to all Muslim organizations not controlled by the state.The text of the letter follows:March 22, 2002Dear Assistant Secretary Jones:The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is seriously concerned about a new religion law in Kazakhstan that was approved by the Parliament and is awaiting the signature of Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev. As of this writing, the law has apparently been sent to Kazakhstan's Constitutional Council for review. It seems likely to return to the President to be signed early next month.If signed, this law demonstrates that the Kazakh government is moving in the wrong direction with regard to democratic development and reform. The law will give government officials the authority to ban all unregistered religious groups at the same time that it makes registration for those groups more difficult to obtain. The law would deny registration to all Muslim organizations not controlled by the government's Muslim Spiritual Directorate. The new law would also make it much easier for the government to ban any religious organization that it views as undesirable.The law has been criticized by religious and human rights groups in and outside Kazakhstan, as well as by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe(OSCE). The latter has expressed its concerns to the Kazakh government about many aspects of the proposed law. Among their concerns, the OSCE stated that the more stringent registration requirements would violate freedom of religion or belief. At the end of last month, the OSCE's representative in Kazakhstan stated that the OSCE had hoped that the Parliament would reject the proposed law.The Commission strongly urges the Administration to make clear to the government of Kazakhstan the great concern about the law within the U.S. government. The Administration should raise this concern immediately, prominently, and persistently in all its dealings with the Kazakhstan government. It is important to recall that the state of religious freedom in a country is frequently a harbinger of that state's commitment to the protection of other human rights and to democratic reform more generally.The Commission has already expressed its concern to the Administration regarding the importance of upholding human rights, especially in the context of the campaign against terrorism. The Commission thus urges the Administration to convey this in the strongest possible way to the government of Kazakhstan.Sincerely,U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOMMichael K. YoungChair

Michael K. Young, Chair
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