

April 15, 2005: Russia: Roundtable with Oleg Mironov and Mufti Shangareev

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WASHINGTON , D.C.

PARTICIPANTS:

OLEG MIRONOV

MUFTI ISMAGIL SHANGAREEV

Transcript by:

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Washington, D.C.

[Statements of Mr. Mironov and Mr. Shangareev made through a translator.]

CATHERINE COSMAN: Welcome everybody. I'm very happy you could all come to hear our two visitors, Oleg Mironov and Mufti Shangareev. We just found out on Tuesday that they were here in Washington. So we were very glad that we could organize this meeting and that you could all come on such short notice.

You have bios of our speakers before you so I won't go into that in great detail because I think the most interesting part of meeting will be the opportunity to hear what they have to say. Obviously they feel that the situation in Russia is becoming more serious for the various religious communities in Russia. So they are planning to form a new organization called the Inter-Confessional Human Rights Defense Center.

You will find in your packet some information based on an interview they gave to the Ekho Moskvyy radio station just yesterday. And John Finerty from the Helsinki Commission, I'm very glad to have you join us and please come to the table if you would like to.

So I think we will start with Oleg Mironov if you would like to start with your view of the current situation of religion in Russia today.

OLEG
MIRONOV: Well, first of all, I want to thank everybody for allowing me to be here and to develop opportunities for further cooperation.

(Off-side conversation.)

If one can speak about the situation in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, one can say really that the possibilities to express one's religion, to practice one's religion now are being realized. For the past seven years there was not the same level of religious freedom as it is now after the Russian Revolution. This is a very important achievement of democracy and in Russia many people today are returning to religion and going to churches. Now, Russian Orthodox churches are being built as villas, mosques, synagogues, Lutheran, and Catholic churches. But there is the danger that these democratic achievements will be limited. And therefore one should pay particular attention to this issue.

Understanding the importance of these issues
- when I was the human rights ombudsman of the Russian Federation from 1998 until February 13, 2004, I held this position. We were concerned with a very wide spectrum of human rights issues. Understanding the importance of the issue of religious freedom, I established a special office branch within my office that was concerned with these issues.

Russia is a multi-confessional country, but unfortunately, various confessions occupy various positions in regard to the law.

I prepared an analysis of the 1997 law on freedom of religious associations and I noted that this law failed to meet several provisions under international and European legal conventions. According to the Russian constitution and international agreements, all religions should have an equal status. But Russian law gives priority to the Russian Orthodox Church. This should not be in the law. Of course in historic literature and in cultural works, one can note the particular role played by Russian Orthodoxy in Russian history but under law, all religions should be equal in status.

The law divides religions into three categories: traditional, religious communities, and religious groups, with various status and various possibilities. And I noted that the law itself sets up a discriminatory situation. And in practice, we see an enormous number of violations of the rights of religious communities and of religious believers. The most common is refusal to register a religious community, the creation of artificial barriers to rental property so that religious communities can practice their religion.

I had the opportunity to become acquainted with these issues because people and communities appealed to us directly about these issues. It's very difficult to get land in order to build a church or a house of worship. Unfortunately there have been instances when synagogues have been burned and desecration of cemeteries, mainly Jewish cemeteries. We are very concerned about this situation. Russia is a huge Euro-Asian power where about 200 ethnic groups and nationalities live, and a very wide spectrum of religious confessions.

I met with the leaders of all religious denominations. I also met with Alexei, the Moscow patriarch and I told him that every person has the right either to believe or not to believe; that is his or her personal right to choose. And those who choose to believe should do so on the basis of a free choice of what belief is most close to their hearts. And if one tries to force everyone to become Russian Orthodox, that is simply a violation.

This conservative view of the Russian Orthodox Church was also expressed in the fact that the Catholic pope was denied permission to visit Russia. I don't believe that Russian society will forgive the Russian Orthodox hierarchy of denying them the possibility of seeing the pope in person. After all, the pope was in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine all around Russia. After all, the pope was a Slav and it was very important for him to be able to visit Russia and

it would have meant a lot to the people of Russia.

We need to develop a culture of multi-religious and multi-ethnic civilization. And with the help of the criminal code, you're certainly not going to bring about respect for leaders and believers of other faiths. And for some reason, Russian leaders always rely on force. And they also rely on the strength of the law rather than on more fitting methods. But multi-religious harmony can only be achieved through culture; can be only achieved through communication among the various religious and national groups that live in Russia.

And although it may seem strange as a result of these policies in Russia, an anti-Russian mood is developing. Of course we see this in Chechnya and in the North Caucasus, where the Russian population living in Chechnya was either forced out or physically exterminated. And the war in Chechnya has given rise to anti-Islamic and discrimination against people from the Caucasus region. And this is extremely dangerous because as my colleague, Mufti Shangareev, will tell you, there are 20 million Muslims in Russia.

And people from the Caucasus and other parts of Russia are now experiencing discrimination simply because of the way they look. When I go into the metro, nobody stops me. But I see how the militia treats various nationalities from the Caucasus or people who look different and they are constantly being subjected to various kinds of police searches, interrogations, examination of their documents.

There is also anti-Semitism in Russia. And another new and very dangerous phenomenon is that of skinheads. These are mainly from Slavic nationalities who are against everyone who is not a Slav. And these skinheads attack and even kill members of other national groups. You may recall the case of the murder of the nine-year-old Tajik girl in St. Petersburg. There are many people from Central Asia and members of various nationalities who are attending universities and living in Russian cities who are now being attacked.

We would like to turn to you and ask for your assistance. I hope this doesn't sound offensive, but my generation still recalls racism in America. But now it no longer exists. It was a phenomenon of the past and I am very glad to see that. But how did you achieve that? Please let us know so we can use this experience in Russia. I myself was born in the Caucasus. I lived in a multi-national collective unit and 20, 30 years ago, nothing along the lines of what is occurring in Russia today happened. So your assistance, your advice would be extremely useful for us.

I don't want to monopolize the situation, so I will end here. And so that I can say thank you for your attention rather than thank you for your toleration. (Laughter.)

MUFTI ISMAGIL SHANGAREEV:

It's very difficult to make a statement after Oleg Mironov. The problem of religious freedom exists on many levels and I represent the Islamic wing since after all Islam is one of the largest groups among the spectrum of religions in Russia. According to various statistics in Russia today, there are 20 to 25 million Muslims. And before the fall of the Soviet Union, there were many more Muslims since most people in Central Asia are Muslim.

And of course Muslims were part of the classic Russian Empire. In the Russian Empire, what is now referred to as the republics of Central Asia was called Turkestan. And if we read the Russian literary classics, we see that the Muslims were the backbone of the Russian Empire. The Chechens and the Ingushetians were in the so-called "wild division" who were the personal bodyguards of the czar. And in 1812, when Napoleon invaded Russia, the first who opposed him were a cavalry unit composed of Tatars and Bashkirs.

Of the 15,000 mosques that existed in czarist Russia - not including Central Asia- after the Soviet period, only 50 remained. But regardless of this difficult situation, Muslims were patriots of their country. But what is occurring with regard to Muslims in Russia today simply is difficult to understand. One of these reasons is probably the war in Chechnya, which gave rise to anti-Chechen and anti-Muslim feelings. And the new expression "persons of nationalities from the Caucasus" - and this is a police expression. Now the police are beginning to develop a new expression: "a person who practices Islam."

You heard a lot about how various religious groups, such as the Pentecostals, are persecuted in Russia. And of course many other religious denominations have been persecuted. But now one must add Islam to that list, even though Islam has been in Russia for many, many centuries.

And the anti-Islamic syndrome in daily life now beginning to become more official, especially after the highest officials declared war against terrorism, the so-called third world

war. Of course, if there is a war and it is directed against specific terrorists who can be prosecuted under specific articles of the criminal code, that is one thing. But when this policy is simply directed against ordinary people who happen to be Muslims, then we consider such a war to be criminal.

I get hundreds of calls from all over Russia from various Muslim families. A typical call may be from the mother of a boy who has never used narcotics, has never engaged in violence. All of the sudden police find on him drugs or explosives and take him away. And policemen who want to earn good grades from their higher-ups are now conducting a campaign against people who are not guilty of anything.

This reminds me of what happened in the 1930's when there were all kinds of imagined terrorist groups, such as the famous doctor's case. In Russia today, such actions are being conducted all over the country and on a very wide scale. This is now turning into a win-win situation for the police especially if you recall - last year, a new law was drafted to reestablish the practice of informing fellow citizens. Again, as happened in the '30s, when one person informed police that his neighbor was a so-called "enemy of the people" and the police arrested them without further ado. Unfortunately this is happening more and more in Russia today.

Now the practice of one citizen informing on another has become very widespread. And the most frequent objects of such denunciations are the most devout Muslims. The local officials and the local police must respond to such denunciations. And of course all the more so because this is a way of trying to advance their careers. And so the police appear along with the incriminating packets consisting of explosive materials, so-called dangerous literature and drugs. This is 100 percent guaranteed for them. And if they manage to find one of these objects, then it is a guaranteed success for them. And of course it is very easy for them to simply plant a small packet of narcotics. And a small explosive device is very easy for them to plant as well.

MS. COSMAN: There is also the problem of labeling people Wahhabi which is a totally undefined term in Russia. It's unclear what it means but it's actually personal interpretation is that it's an extension of a term used in Soviet times meaning a radical Muslim.

MR.

SHANGAREEV: And as soon as the police have planted either these explosives or narcotics, the case automatically goes further. And it is impossible to prove that these objects don't belong to you. The materials of a Russian journalist, Alexander Khinchstein who wrote a lot about who has exposed a lot about police corruption. And according to Khinchstein's view - and he's investigated a lot of such cases - a third of the criminal cases where narcotics and explosives are involved are falsified. But of course he is speaking about criminal cases in general, not specifically relating to Muslims. But according to our statistics, in cases relating to Islamic believers or people from the Islamic community, 70 percent of these cases are falsified. And if you need specific cases, I can provide them.

And I began my presentation by saying that Muslims are patriotic Russian citizens. Maybe this is done so that Muslims will become - will protest so there will be tension between the religious and ethnic communities. And Oleg Mironov pointed out that the Russian Orthodox Church is given priority. And Islam, or rather members of the Muslim community are becoming persecuted. But the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Russia are very modern people and many of them are well known scientists, they are educated people in various fields. And this atmosphere of protest is spreading among the 20 million people who belong to the Muslim community in Russia.

And here we have several representatives from the Pentecostal community. I know they were persecuted to such a degree that they felt obliged to flee Russia. And such occasions when Muslims have felt obliged to flee have occurred several times in the Muslim history, most famously twice in the early period of Muslim history: when they fled Mecca from Medina, when the new era began - when Islamic history began. And many Muslims are beginning to think about leaving Russia. Many Muslims are thinking of leaving Russia in search - waiting for better times or to act - to think about acting as happened in Ukraine to try and bring about a better situation inside Russia. And the situation is very complex.

I can speak a lot longer but I'm sure you have questions.

MS. COSMAN: So please, anyone that has questions. Father Victor Potapov.

POTAPOV:

(Through translator.) Even in our developed - democratically developed country - (inaudible) -- United States after 9/11, the Congress in a very hurried manner passed the Patriot Act, which many human rights activists are up in arms about because there were many provisions of that Act that are considered by many to be a violation of our constitutional guarantees. We also have a problem with racial profiling. I don't know how big that problem that is but I think that after 9/11, a lot of people looked with suspicion upon Muslims in this country. And so if this problem continues to exist in our highly developed democratic society, Russia must be in for a long haul or it's going to be very, very difficult for Russia to implement these laws - these principles in their society.

MR.

MIRONOV: I think I've clarified my position in regard to your question. One cannot defend - so-call defend the rights of the nation as a whole by violating the rights of a specific group within the society. And that is why I focused on Chechnya. When the police showed me photographs of how the terrorists tortured and ridiculed Russian soldiers- in this way they try to justify their own cruelties and I told them that that you're just mirroring their tactics. You or I have to establish constitutional order. And you can't adopt methods used by bandits and terrorists, otherwise, what will distinguish you? That is the task of government to figure out how to balance the battle against terrorists while preserving the civil and politics rights of the population as a whole.

We are totally opposed to the mass violation of the democratic rights of Russian citizens. We have fewer and fewer democratic institutions in Russia. And even though it's very painful for me to say this, more and more we have only have one source of authority and power in Russia. We already are in effect deprived of elections as a democratic means. And due to the latest changes to the law on referendums, it's almost impossible to conduct democratic referendums.

The concentration of power in one person's hands has reached a critical point. And we want to let this power elite know that they should stop, unless they want a social explosion inside Russia. We are patriotic because we are trying to protect the democratic rights of the citizens of Russia and prevent a social explosion.

Q: (John Graz, International Religions Liberty Association): I would like to thank Shangareev for being here, for what you said and also Oleg Mironov. I would like to thank you because during your turn, you were very open to the problem of religious minorities and very helpful. I hope that those who are now in power would be so helpful. There are always some specific cases persecuted or religious nationalists persecuting other groups.

But

I would like to ask you one question about what we are doing here. Do you think that what we are doing here - submitting reports, sometimes organizing meetings - sharing information about Russia and religious freedom, human rights, helps you or not? We organized several congresses in central Russia. In ways it's helpful and some other way Russians have a strong reaction against what we are doing because it comes from a foreign country.

MR.

MIRONOV: We live in an open world and there is no Great Wall of China. When I was human rights ombudsman of Russia, I prepared six reports about the human rights situation in my country and I prepared special reports about those problems I considered most critical. And I was always particularly interested in reports from other countries about the situation in Russia. And the American view of what is going on in Russia is particularly important. Your report helped me perhaps to see problems that I otherwise would not have understood. So I think Russian groups and Russian society as a whole should be grateful to NGOs outside of Russia who objectively consider the situation in Russia.

Twenty

years ago, one couldn't have imagined such an open society in that we would have had the opportunity to interact with you. But we - (inaudible, laughter) - have the opportunity to touch the walls of the Pentagon. And after all, this is a great achievement of democracy, and you have also made our contributions to that.

MR.

SHANGAREEV: And I would like to add, there is value to discussions about the situation. I think those law enforcement officials are afraid only of publicity. They don't catch golden fish in muddy waters. If they do catch golden fish in muddy water; if you clear the water then you'll make their lives much more difficult. Therefore, it is very important for those who are persecuted that one will talk about their situations, that there would be roundtables and conferences, so there would be articles published, so there would be discussion. They are only afraid of that since dishonest people are afraid of publicity. Honest people don't fear that.

We are after all turning
to you for assistance, since even in the media outlets in Russia; there no longer is much freedom. For example, in Astrakhan region, they arrested a Muslim and all the newspapers simply wrote that he is a terrorist. We called these media outlets and asked them what is your proof? They said we can't act in any different way. If we write differently, write different kinds of articles, we'll lose our jobs.

MS. COSMAN: Oleg Mironov is adding you should say that this person who was arrested in Astrakhan is your brother.

MR.

SHANGAREEV: But this situation applies to many regions of Russia. That is why I started with the statistic that in the days of the Russian Empire 15,000 mosques in Russia. And when Perestroika began, there were only 50. And in the '90s we took a breath but now unfortunately, we're sinking again into this morass. But now the situation may be even worse.

I
began my presentation by referring to the Russian Empire. The Muslims of the Russian Empire were patriots. After all, they did have 15,000 mosques. I am not going to talk about the Soviet times but after 10 years in the post- Perestroika period or maybe 15 years, we're actually now in a worse situation than we were in the Soviet times. And other than God and you, there isn't anyone to help us. It has now become terrible to live in Russia.

Q: (Lee Boothby, International Commission on Freedom of Conscience.) I'm wondering in your opinion what in fact the official Russian Federation - I'm not sure whether it's called a commission or committee - of religious organizations have on the problems that you have detailed?

MR. SHANGAREEV: If there were a civilized dialogue about the specific problems of violations, how to overcome them. Of course there are such commissions but many of those who are disfavored and against whom these denunciations are written in order to frighten them, these official commissions will simply say, these people are criminals - narcotics were found and let law enforcement figure out the situation.

So rather than this being a question of religious freedom, it becomes a criminal matter. And that is why I referred with such detail to the 1930s when scholars and religious figures were turned into criminals. They weren't told, well, we don't like you because you're trying to defend religious freedom. They were told, well, narcotics are found and therefore this commission to which we refer cannot work to help in this situation.

MR. MIRONOV: I would also like to add we do have structures that are concerned with freedom of religion and freedom of conscience in the parliament. We have a bicameral parliament and what you referred to as the House of Representatives, we refer to as the Duma. And what you call the Senate, we call the Federation Council.

I was deputy in the Duma twice. And each of these structures - the Council of Federation and the Duma have committees relating to religious freedom. But they are mainly concerned with development of legislation in these areas. But in the executive, there is a commission dealing with relations with religious groups. And when I was human rights ombudsman, this commission was headed by a deputy minister. Now there is only one commission and the specialist on my staff worked together with the members of this official commission.

And they considered complex and difficult issues but of course the high-level government decisions don't reach the local level. And unfortunately, now the situation has arisen that labels are stuck on various religious denominations and they are now called sects. I said many times that to call a religious group a sect is insulting. And as a result of being called sects, pressure was exerted against Adventists, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, and pressure was also directed against Orthodox believers who are schismatic from the Moscow Patriarchate. Although they differ only slightly from the Moscow Patriarchate, they have more severe rites, they lead to strict ways of life, and they have a very complex relationship towards the Moscow Patriarchate. Therefore, even the positive moves and actions made on the high level and often on the local level, we see repression, discrimination, and negative actions.

Although, I would like to emphasize, since the October revolution in 1917, freedom of religion in the last 10 years in Russia is greater than at any time since the Russian revolution in 1917. You can freely attend the house of worship of your choice, be it synagogue, mosque, or church. But even though there are positive achievements and they are considerable, in addition to that, there are many difficult trends occurring. We fear that these negative trends may accelerate to such a point that they will in effect obliterate the positive achievements that have been made in the area of religious freedom.

I can tell you honestly that even though this new organization -- maybe it won't be so well received. But I am a secular person and of course there are many such people in Russia. Our main goal after all is that anyone - have a respectful attitude towards a person regardless of whether or not they share their religious convictions or if that person has no religious conviction. And I as a secular person also closely connect the problems of multi-religious and multi-ethnic issues and identities in Russia. And in order that Russia can be a stable society and government we need inter-ethnic and inter-confessional peace in our country.

Q: (John Finerty, Helsinki Commission) I mentioned first that when Mr. Mironov was nominated, that people kind of looked at him with a little bit of apprehension; when he finished his ten-years up, people looked at him with respect for his work. Are there any areas in Russia now that are distinguished by a good attitude toward religious liberties and are there any that are distinguished by bad for religious liberty?

MR.

MIRONOV: I would like to note that 30 years ago on August 1, 1975, the final Act of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe was signed, which began the Helsinki process, which we view with great respect. Unfortunately, for a year now, I have not been the human rights ombudsman of the Russian Federation and therefore I don't have very precise statistics. But for example, in Rostov and Krasnodar there are many Cossacks and there, preference is given to the Russian Orthodox Church to the detriment of other religious groups.

There,

for example, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and the Baptists have a very difficult situation. There is negative public opinion in these areas towards non-Russian-Orthodox. Second, administrative measures are undertaken to the disadvantage of non-Russian-Orthodox groups, allowing them to rent or build religious buildings, registration, practicing their religious rights, organizing provocations, which disturb their religious ceremonies, and I received many complaints about that. I turned to the courts in defense of these religious communities. In Kalmikia is the only European territory with a majority Buddhist population and that is unique for Europe.

But

since there are many Russians there - ethnic Russians, constituted by half the population who are Russian Orthodox, they view the Buddhist population with respect and the situation there is very peaceful I visited Omsk, where maybe you remember, there was procurator and the deputy - it was he who renounced his parliamentary seat all together in favor of Boris Yeltsin. After that, he became the general procurator of Russia. He is now the deputy to the governor of Omsk and he - one of his areas of responsibility is relations with religious groups. I had seen him for a long time. I was involved in his doctoral dissertation defense. When I spoke with him recently, I was amazed; he was a Neanderthal. He all of the sudden only recognizes the Russian Orthodox Church. He labeled all other groups as sects - totalitarian sects. And this is a man who was a former deputy in the Russian Duma and now he is an assistant to the governor to the Omsk region and he has such views.

But,

we have 89 geographic regions in Russia. And after all, I used to think that 50 states in America was a large number - (scattered laughter) - but the Russian nature is famous for being expansive, so I guess 89 geographic regions in Russia is not that large. Some of these 89 regions only have 20,000 people. But I was selected - I was elected from Saratov where there were 550,000 only in my own electoral district. But in Buryatia there are only 20,000 people or in Ninetsk in the Arctic. A thousand kilometers north of the Arctic Circle, there are more reindeers than people and that is where shamanism is predominant. So Russia is a mysterious and interesting country and you'll find many

things there highly complex. (Laughter.) And that is why we love our country.

Q: (Off-mike.) My question is regarding the radicals. Is it perceived as something that government is only using as a tool in order to persecute - (off-mike) - or is there any actual problem from these likely radicals? And if there isn't now, is there a danger that with the ongoing persecution of the Muslim community that a radical will rise to power?

MS. COSMAN: Can you break it down a little bit?

Q: Sure. Is there currently a danger from radical groups?

MS. COSMAN: Which group did you mention?

Q: (Off-mike.) Or is this simply a tool that the government is using to further persecute the Muslims? And if there is no radicalism currently, does the ongoing persecution run the risk of creating alienation and anger within the Muslim community that could eventually lead to the rise of extremism?

MR. SHANGAREEV: They are trying to secure against the people who will become members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir. The name of the organization is very hard to understand for the local population. So just the name of it creates this sensation that it's something dangerous, something maybe to stay away from. You're very correctly pronouncing the name of the organization but in Russia not very often people can actually do that. In Tatarstan or Bashkortistan, or other areas, if they have committed criminal acts, then they are liable under the law.

But sometimes actual criminal acts are artificially linked to religious labels. For example, the term Wahhabism, if you ask any lawyer what is Wahhabism, he will say a person who violates the law. He is a terrorist or a radical. And if such a person has in fact violated the law, then he should be liable under the law. But why dream up a new term such as Wahhabism? Actually, the genuine history of Wahhabism is totally different. But what is commonly understood today is Wahhabism is very different. But the ordinary person has an association with Islam and a Wahhabist is a Muslim.

This way, the concepts are being changed and an artificial conflation of the term, Wahhabist - who is a bad person - with Muslims who are also bad. And if he isn't bad, then he is potentially bad. And why don't - why shouldn't he be punished just in case - in advance rather than wait until he really is bad? One should right away neutralize him. And that is why this kind of scenario that I have previously described is occurring. Maybe you understand these fine nuances but the ordinary person in Russia does not. They are frightened by such complex terms as Hizb-ut-Tahrir or Wahhabism, and so they are frightened already by the use of those words because they are connected to Muslims. And if some - if a woman wears a headscarf, she is automatically seen as dangerous. People leave buses if women wearing headscarves get on.

And the government is especially encouraging these negative stereotypes of Muslims. And the ordinary Muslim is getting more and more angry. And he says to himself, if there are terrorists, then they should be punished but we aren't terrorists. But the militia is increasingly saying, well, you're all potential terrorists. Maybe this isn't an entirely appropriate example. From my youth, there were punks. They were all told you were bad. So they all said, okay, if you view us as bad, then we're bad. And among many Muslims in Russia, a similar mood is developing, particularly among young people. And they, you know, view themselves as normal Russians - citizens of Russia. But if you don't view us as normal citizens of Russia, then we won't act that way and that is very dangerous. These protest moods are dangerous, and normal people are being expelled out of the normal atmosphere of the country.

MR.

MIRONOV: I totally agree with my friend and colleague but at the same time -one shouldn't pretend that there are not groups which are trying to gain power or which act in criminal ways, but hide behind nationalists or religious masks. There are such groups among Slavs, some who - the followers of Barkashov, for example- use the swastika as their symbol. And there are such groups among the population of the North Caucasus who under the flag of Islam also commit actual crimes. If this was not the case, there would not be - the terrorist acts in Chechnya or Beslan and of course one has to struggle against them. These are criminal groups, which hide behind religious slogans.

But

at the same time, when one struggles against such extremist groups, one cannot brand all Muslims because of the existence of such extremist groups. And if such a policy continues, this will inevitably lead to protests from Muslims in Russia and such a future protest might be expressed in very cruel ways. Our goal is to harmonize inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations to develop not simply tolerance but respect. And only in such a way will the unity and territorial integrity of Russia be preserved.

In one of Shakespeare's sonnets, the most welcome, unexpected guests is when they leave - (laughter) - but of course we were invited, but nevertheless, thank you very much.

MR.

SANGAREEV: I would like to add a few words. Of course there is terrorism and of course, unfortunately, there are many terrorists among Muslims and also among other nationalities. But when, after the latest terrorist act, there is a swelling of anti-Muslim feeling we are the first to say this has nothing to do with the essence of Islam. And those who conduct such terrorist acts, we - the main victim of such actions-- are those people who are totally innocent. And fellow Muslims also are the victims of such acts. So therefore, I don't think one can consider the people- who conduct such terrorist acts-- to be Muslims at all. They create an atmosphere of intolerance towards Islam and towards individual Muslims. Law enforcement officials act on the basis of this mood and further increase it. And in Russia, a dangerous precedent is being created.

MS. COSMAN: Our last question.

Q:

(Through translator.) The head of our religious rights organization is Boris Perchatkin, who was imprisoned in Soviet times. He is a Pentecostal leader. We are concerned about what is going on in Russia today, the arbitrary actions that are being conducted, and we'd like to call particular attention to the situation in Aldon (ph) where a very serious violation has occurred.

This has to do with a family of Pentecostals and one of their children died and two years later, criminal actions were brought against the father of this family because the local authorities accused them of having committed human sacrifice. I would also like to give you this information and also if you need to make copies and give it to our guests.

MR.

SHANGAREEV: I would like to give a specific example also relating to Uzbekistan. The president is battling against his political opponents. And he was very - it was very easy for him to accuse active people belonging to Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which was banned. And if a leaflet from Hizb-ut-Tahrir was found in his house, which could have been planted, he was simply packed off to jail. There are hundreds of thousands of people in this desert prison who are there because they are members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

My brother, Monsour, as a result of a denunciation, people came to his house and searched. There were nine people, huge guys, at six o'clock in the morning. They didn't find anything. When they left, in his shoes, they found - all of the sudden, an explosive device. And in all 15 jackets, all of a sudden some drugs were found. And now he is in prison. How do you prove that these things didn't belong to him? It is impossible. So I myself have encountered this problem.

And I warned my wife and if I myself faced this problem, if narcotics or explosives are found - say they are not mine but those of my children because until they are 14 years old, they cannot bear criminal responsibility. After all, it's impossible to prove whether these objects belong to me or to my children. And I also recommend to people that they sew up their pockets. So we are heading down the road toward fascism. It is very terrible and that is why we are here.

MR. MIRONOV: But at the same time we are optimists.

MS.

COSMAN: And I did want to mention the problems of the Pentecostal family. This family had their children removed by the state on the basis of these totally false and slanderous accusations that they were committing human sacrifice. One child had died of natural causes. As a result of that, two years later, the father was thrown in prison and the family lost their children to the state. Now the parents are being charged money for the upkeep of these children in the orphanages.

On that rather grim note, I did want to point out that Mr. Mironov and Mufti Shangareev are forming a new organization which they hope to register next month called the Interconfessional Human Rights Center, and I'm sure we'll be hearing more from them. So thank you all very much for coming.

(END)