

## 3/20/2009: Pending Religion Law in Tajikistan Concerns USCIRF

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is concerned that Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon is preparing to sign a highly restrictive religion law - with numerous provisions that may violate Tajikistan's international legal commitments.

The law was hastily adopted by Tajikistan's Parliament earlier this month and it is before the president.

If signed, the law will legalize harsh policies already adopted by the Tajik government against its majority Muslim population, including the closure of hundreds of mosques and limiting the religious education of children. Moreover, the law will impose state censorship on religious literature, restrict the conduct of religious rites to officially-approved places of worship and allow the state to control the activities of religious associations.

"The picture for religious freedom in Tajikistan is growing dim," said Felice Gaer, Chair of the federally mandated, independent U.S. Commission. "The passage of this problematic new law could severely limit religious freedoms in Tajikistan. President Rakhmon must consider his country's international commitments as he considers whether to sign the bill."

Ms. Gaer noted that running rough shod over Tajik citizen's rights will not pass unnoticed.

"The Commission is actively examining the status of Tajikistan to determine whether it qualifies for the 'Watch List,'" said Ms. Gaer. "We call on the Obama administration to make our concerns known."

Tajikistan is a signatory of the U.N. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18 of the ICCPR provides for religious freedom. Also, Tajikistan belongs to the 56-state Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which has additional religious freedom commitments.

The new religion law places onerous restrictions on the Muslim community, such as limiting the number of mosques based on the number of local residents and imposing state interference in the appointment of imams. The preface to the law singles out the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam for its "special role" in the development of Tajikistan's "culture and moral life," downplaying the significance of the Shi'a Ismaili minority, which lives in Tajikistan's Mountainous Badakhshan Region.

The law will also cause difficulties for Tajikistan's other religious minorities by dramatically increasing the numerical threshold for registration requirements, as well as requiring the founders of a religious group seeking registration to certify that they have lived in their territory for at least five years and adhered to the religion. The law also requires that a religious community obtain consent of the Religious Affairs Committee to invite foreigners or attend religious conferences outside the country.

And there are other religious freedom concerns. The Tajik government has already closed many unregistered mosques and prayer rooms. While they are often permitted to reopen, in 2007-08 the government demolished three unregistered mosques in Dushanbe. The government also indirectly controls the selection of

imams. Since 2007, the Ministry of Education has prohibited girls from wearing the hijab, an Islamic head covering, at public schools and universities.

Concerning minority faiths, the government continued to ban the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as two Protestant congregations. Authorities continue their attempts to expropriate the property of Grace Sunmin Church in Dushanbe. In June 2008, the country's only synagogue was bulldozed to clear the grounds for a new presidential palace in Dushanbe, and inadequate land was offered in "compensation."