

## 4/24/09: Kazakhstan: USCIRF Letter to the Washington Post

On Easter Sunday April 12, 2009, the Washington Post published a travel article on Kazakhstan. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom sent this letter in response

April 14, 2009

Dear Washington Post Editors &ndash;

While Kazakhstan may be "heaven" for travelers, it is not for the many religious minorities who live there.

Although the author enjoyed his first visit to the splendors of Central Asia, he failed to mention Kazakhstan's poor record on religious freedom and related human rights. Despite some recent positive developments, such as the Constitutional Council's ruling against the highly restrictive religion law, branches of Kazakhstan's government continue repressive actions against various religious groups. Even in a travel section, the Washington Post has an obligation to inform its readers better. Isn't the suffering and persecution of religious minorities in Kazakhstan worth a mention, especially in an article published on Easter Sunday?

It starts from the top. In early 2008, President Nursultan Nazarbayev publicly criticized foreign religious groups, saying that "Kazakhstan should [not] become a dumping ground for various religious movements." Since that speech, there has been a marked increase in governmental restrictions targeting unregistered and minority religious communities.

The government continues to punish peaceful Muslim groups for their independent activities and views. Churches within the Council of Churches Baptist continue to report police raids, surveillance, short-term detentions, and court-ordered fines for unregistered religious activity. Kazakh authorities continue to single out Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishnas, labeling them as "dangerous," and both groups report continuing harassment by a government created hostile public atmosphere, and difficulty in registering their religion as is required by the law.

Our Commission is required by law to monitor these matters; the Washington Post should do so as part of its professional responsibility.

Felice D. Gaer

Chair

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

