



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Kazakhstan

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the various religious communities worship largely without government interference. Although local officials attempt on occasion to limit the practice of religion by some nontraditional groups, higher-level officials, or courts usually intervene to correct such attempts.

The overall status of religious freedom deteriorated somewhat during the period covered by this report. 2005 legislation that limited constitutional protections of religious freedom remained in force. National security amendments enacted on July 8, 2005, imposed mandatory registration requirements on missionaries and religious organizations. Most religious groups, including minority and nontraditional denominations, reported that the legal changes were implemented in a manner that did not materially affect religious activities. Unregistered religious groups reported an increase in court actions against them and an increase in the level of fines imposed for nonregistration.

During the period covered by this report, levels of harassment of religious organizations by local officials remained consistent with the previous reporting period. Reports of local law enforcement officials visiting religious organizations for inspections remained at a level consistent with previous years and most religious organizations reported generally good cooperation from the Government.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The ambassador and other U.S. officials have supported the country's efforts to increase links and mutual understanding among religious groups. U.S. officials engaged in private and public dialogue at all levels to urge that any new legislation be consistent with the country's constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and with the country's tradition of religious tolerance. U.S. embassy and U.S. Department of State officials visited religious facilities, met with religious leaders, and worked with government officials to address specific cases of concern. During the reporting period, the embassy sponsored exchange programs for Muslim and other religious leaders to meet with a diverse range of counterparts in the United States. U.S. embassy officials maintained an ongoing dialogue with a broad range of groups within the religious community.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,052,540 square miles, and according to January 2006 data from the government statistics agency, its population is 15,219,300.

The society is ethnically diverse, and many religious groups are represented. Due in part to the country's nomadic and Soviet past, many residents describe themselves as nonbelievers. Several researchers reported and surveys suggested low levels of religious conviction and worship attendance. The Government maintains statistics on the number of registered congregations and organizations but does not keep statistics on the size of each group. The most recent reliable statistics on religious affiliation came from the 1999 census. Although there was a large increase in the number of minority religious congregations registered since 1999, the Government believes that percentages of the population adhering to particular faiths have remained consistent.

Ethnic Kazakhs, who constituted approximately one-half of the population, and ethnic Uzbeks, Uighurs, and Tatars, who collectively comprised less than 10 percent, are historically Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school. Other Islamic groups, which accounted for less than 1 percent of the population, included Shafit Sunni (traditionally associated with Chechens), Shi'a, Sufi, and Ahmadi. The highest concentration of citizens who identified themselves as practicing Muslims was located in the southern region bordering Uzbekistan. A sizeable population of ethnic Russians, and smaller populations of ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Belarusians, were Russian Orthodox by tradition; together they constituted approximately one-third of the population. An estimated 1.5 percent of the population was ethnic German, many of whom were Roman Catholic or Lutheran.

According to government statistics, Protestant Christian congregations outnumbered Russian Orthodox congregations, although it is unlikely that their number of adherents is higher. The Government reported registering ninety-three "nontraditional" Protestant Christian churches and forty-five affiliated foreign missionaries during the reporting period.

There were two Baptist groups in the country, the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists ("Council of Churches") and the Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists ("Union of Baptists"). Although there were no precise statistics available on the Council of Churches, religious observers estimated up to 1,000 adherents, while Union of Baptists adherents were reported to number more than 10,000. The Government reportedly registered 198 Union of Baptists churches during the reporting period, along with 22 affiliated foreign missionaries.

Other Christian associations with a sizable number of congregations included Presbyterians, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and Pentecostals. Smaller communities of Methodists, Mennonites, and Mormons were registered. During the reporting period government officials continued to report an increase in registrations of congregations and missionaries affiliated with South Korean Protestant Christian churches.

There was a Roman Catholic archdiocese, whose members accounted for 2 percent of the population, and which includes many ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Germans. The Government reported eighty-three registered Roman Catholic churches and affiliated organizations throughout the country. During the year the Government registered 198 foreign Roman Catholic clergy and missionaries. A smaller, affiliated community of Greek Catholics, many of whom were ethnic Ukrainians, registered three churches, which were served by nine foreign priests and missionaries.

A Jewish community, estimated at well below 1 percent of the population, had synagogues in several larger cities, including Almaty, Astana, and Pavlodar. Rabbis in Almaty reported an increase in attendance for both services and religious education during the reporting period. The Government reported registering eight foreign rabbis and Jewish missionaries.

The Government registered fifty-eight nontraditional religious groups during the reporting period, including affiliates of the Hare Krishna movement, the Baha'is, Christian Scientists, and the Unification Church. The Government reported four registered Buddhist groups throughout the country.

According to government statistics, there were 413 foreign missionaries in the country as of January 2006. The majority of registered missionaries identified themselves as Christian, with many coming from South Korea, Russia, and other former Soviet countries. While there were only twelve registered foreign Muslim missionaries, more unregistered ones were believed to be active in the southern regions of the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the various religious groups worshiped largely without government interference; however, local and regional officials attempted on occasion to limit or control the practice of religion by several groups, especially nontraditional religious communities. The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides the right to decline religious affiliation.

However, the Government enacted national security amendments in July 2005 that narrowed legal protections for religious freedom. The amendments clarified that religious groups are required to register with the Government and in the individual regions (oblasts) in which they have congregations. The amendments give government officials the right to suspend activities of religious groups for administrative reasons. The Government continued to express publicly its support for religious tolerance and diversity.

The national religion law explicitly requires religious organizations to register with the Government; however, it continues to provide that all persons are free to practice their religion "alone or together with others." Prior to 2005 national security amendments to the religion law, religious organizations were required to register if they wished to be accorded legal status in order to buy or rent property, hire employees, or engage in other legal transactions. To register, a religious organization must have at least ten members and submit an application to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). In practice most religious communities choose to register with the Government and are registered with few difficulties.

In December 2005 the Government established the Religious Issues Committee (RIC) within the MOJ. This MOJ committee replaced the Council on Relations with Religious Communities (CRRC), which reported to the prime minister. The RIC serves as a liaison between religious groups and the Government. In addition, the RIC serves as a consultative body within the MOJ to facilitate the registration of religious groups. Most of the twenty-two RIC employees previously worked with the CRRC.

In 2004 the MOJ designed and implemented a new, one-step registration process, and religious groups noted that registration became more efficient during the reporting period. Article 9 of the religion law requires registration of local religious organizations with the regional office of the MOJ. While religious groups were able to register without difficulty in most cases, some minority religious groups reported that local MOJ officials sometimes denied or delayed registration based on minor administrative concerns. Officials in Western Kazakhstan and Atyrau Oblasts were cited by several groups as being resistant to working with nontraditional groups seeking registration.

The Council of Churches has a policy of not seeking or accepting registration in former Soviet countries. In 1961 the Council of Churches split from the Union of Baptists, which has no objection to registering its congregations. The Union of Baptists reported that all congregations that sought registration during the reporting period successfully obtained it.

The Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Center reported that local MOJ authorities have refused, since 2001, repeated applications to register its branch in Atyrau Oblast.

As in previous years, government officials frequently expressed concern regarding the potential spread of political and religious extremism in the south of the country. The Committee for National Security (KNB) has characterized the fight against "religious extremism" as a top priority of the internal intelligence service. An extremism law that came into effect in February 2005 applies to religious and other organizations. Under this law, the Government has broad latitude in identifying and designating a group as an extremist organization, banning a designated group's activities, and criminalizing membership in a banned organization. In March 2005 the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT)

political movement was the first organization banned under the extremism law. By the end of the reporting period, no apolitical religious organizations had been outlawed as extremist.

The elections law prohibits political parties based upon ethnic, gender, or religious affiliation.

In 2002 the Constitutional Council ruled that a particular legislative provision violated the constitutional principle separating church and state. This provision required that the Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), a national organization headed by the chief mufti in Almaty, must approve the registration of any Muslim group. The council also noted that the provisions might infringe on the constitutional right to freely disseminate religious beliefs.

In an early 2005 meeting with imams from throughout the country, President Nursultan Nazarbayev reportedly stated that Sunni mosques should affiliate with the SAMK. In May 2005 the press reported that the akim (governor) of Southern Kazakhstan Oblast, along with heads of regional law enforcement agencies, met with imams of mosques in that oblast in an effort to pressure nonaligned imams and congregations to join the SAMK to ensure liturgical orthodoxy. There were unconfirmed reports that other oblast akims held similar meetings with imams to encourage affiliation with the SAMK. On several occasions the chief mufti publicly deplored the proliferation of nontraditional religions, which he defined as any congregation not affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church or with the SAMK. During a May conference on Sufism in Iran and Central Asia, several local Sufis reportedly accused the SAMK of promoting "Wahhabism" and intolerance among Muslims, a charge the SAMK publicly denied. Notwithstanding SAMK influence and pressure, during the reporting period the Government registered mosques and Muslim communities unaffiliated with the SAMK.

Neither law nor regulation prohibits foreign missionary activity. Foreign missionaries, like all visitors, are required to register with the migration police and indicate the purpose of their stay. Under July 2005 amendments to the religion law, local and foreign missionaries are required to register annually with the MOJ and provide information on religious affiliation, territory of missionary work, and time period for conducting that work. All literature and other materials to be used to support missionary work must be provided with the registration application; use of materials not vetted during the registration process is illegal. In addition, a missionary must produce registration documents for the sponsoring religious organization and a power of attorney from the sponsoring organization to be allowed to work on its behalf. The MOJ may refuse registration to missionaries whose work would be inconsistent with the law, including laws prohibiting the incitement of interethnic or interreligious hatred. The constitution requires foreign religious associations to conduct their activities, including appointing the heads of religious associations, "in coordination with appropriate state institutions." Foreigners are permitted under the law to register religious organizations; however, they generally are required to list a majority of local citizens among the ten founders of the organization.

During the reporting period one group reported difficulty in obtaining registration for a missionary who moved from Southern Kazakhstan Oblast to Almaty. The missionary was registered to work in Almaty in May 2006. Two groups reported that foreign missionaries were denied entry into the country based upon another government's addition of these missionaries to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) visa blacklist which the Government is bound by treaty obligations to honor. In one case, the missionary had worked in the country for more than ten years and his family was living in Karaganda. Many foreign missionaries reported good cooperation with local and national authorities.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools. Children must attend secular schools through high school; some secular schools are private. Homeschooling is not permitted, except for children at the preschool level and for noncitizen children. Parents may enroll children in supplemental religious education classes provided by registered religious organizations.

The July 2005 national security amendments include a provision that religious training of a child shall not cause damage to a child's all-around development or physical or moral health. However, they do not clarify how such damage should be judged or which agency would make such a determination. The current law does not allow religious groups to educate children without approval from the Ministry of Education. This makes lack of such approval a ground for refusing to register a religious organization whose charter includes provisions for religious education. In early 2005 the Ministry of Education issued a circular instructing teachers to be alert in detecting behavior that indicated children were being exposed to political or religious extremism. There were unconfirmed reports that similar instructions were reiterated during the reporting period, although there were no reports of legal proceedings resulting from teachers reporting on students' religious education.

The Government exempted registered religious organizations from taxes on both church collections and income from certain religious activities. However, congregations are required to pay for services such as fire company protection for religious buildings, a service not provided by the Government. The Government has donated buildings, land, and provided other assistance for the construction of new mosques, synagogues, and Russian Orthodox churches.

The Government invited the national leaders of the two largest religious groups, Islam and Russian Orthodoxy, to participate jointly in some state events; Roman Catholic and Jewish leaders have been included in such events as well. Leaders of other religious groups, including Baptists, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, and other nontraditional religious groups, at times also have participated in some events.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Under the amended religion law, the Government may deny registration based upon an insufficient number of adherents or inconsistencies between the provisions of a religious organization's charter and the law. Under the law on public associations, a registered organization, including a religious group, may have all activities suspended by court order for a period of three to six months for defiance of the constitution or laws or for systematic pursuit of activities that contradict the charter and bylaws of the organization as registered. In February 2005 the parliament amended this law to empower police, procurators, and citizens to petition a court to suspend the activities of a registered organization for failure to rectify violations or for repeated violations of the law. This amendment was passed at the same time as the

extremism law was adopted.

During a suspension, the organization concerned is prohibited from speaking with the media on behalf of the organization; holding meetings, gatherings, or services; and undertaking financial transactions other than meeting ongoing contractual obligations such as paying salaries. The Government usually claimed that religious groups' charters did not meet the requirements of the law when refusing or significantly delaying registration. In several cases authorities cited discrepancies between Russian and Kazakh language versions of a group's charter or referred a charter for expert examination.

Article 375 of the Administrative Code allows authorities to suspend the activities or fine the leaders of unregistered groups. Recent amendments to the religion law incorporate language consistent with Article 375. During the period covered by this report, unregistered denominations reported an increase in cases filed under Article 375. As in previous years, the court of first instance often acquitted the accused. Religious groups reported cases filed under Article 374-1, a related provision added to the Administrative Code by the July 2005 national security amendments, which carries significantly heavier fines than Article 375. Local authorities have broad discretion in determining whether to file charges for nonregistered religious activity under Article 375 or 374-1, which was applied unevenly in different localities.

Procurators have the right to inspect annually all organizations registered with state bodies; there were few reports that these inspections, when they occurred, were overly intrusive or were considered harassment by any religious groups inspected. Where religious groups operated as legal entities, such as by running collective farms and restaurants or operating orphanages, authorities conducted health, sanitation, and other inspections relevant to the nature of the entities' operations. Authorities conducted public safety inspections of premises used for religious worship to ensure compliance with building and fire codes. These inspections also provided authorities with information about the registration status of the groups being inspected.

Although the national Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Center noted generally positive relations with the central Government, the group alleged several incidents of harassment by local governments. Although local Jehovah's Witnesses organizations are registered at the national level, in Astana and Almaty, and in thirteen (of fourteen) oblasts, the center has attempted unsuccessfully since 2001 to register in Atyrau Oblast. Its most recent application was turned down in December 2005 based on incomplete registration materials. The Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that local officials sometimes denied the group permits to rent stadiums and other large public or private sites for religious meetings. However, the Center also reported that government treatment of these requests varied. No other religious groups have reported similar instances of being denied permits for public gatherings.

There were reports that local representatives of the KNB or police officials disrupted meetings in private homes during the period covered by this report. Several groups reported that local law enforcement representatives attended their services although their presence generally was not considered disruptive.

During the reporting period the Council of Churches noted several court cases against churchgoers for participating in the activities of an unregistered group. When individuals were found to be guilty of violating Article 375 of the administrative code, courts imposed a fine. Council of Churches members usually refused to pay fines levied by courts for nonregistration. Although the Government generally did not enforce payment of the fines, in one instance authorities imposed a three-day jail sentence.

Although the Hare Krishna movement was registered at the national and local levels, leaders reported continuing harassment by the local government in the form of repeated lawsuits seeking confiscation of land in Almaty Oblast used as a communal farm. In April 2006 an appeals court upheld a lower court decision that the land should revert to the Karasai regional akimat (equivalent to a county government), because the farmer from whom Hare Krishna followers had purchased the land in 1999 did not hold title, and thus the land had not been properly privatized. On April 25, 2006, local officials went to the commune to evict the followers. Hare Krishna followers peacefully resisted and local authorities did not escalate the situation through force. The Hare Krishnas claimed that the local government targeted the commune because they were a nontraditional religious community. They cited statements by local officials, such as an April 25, 2006, interview with Channel 31 in which a Karasai akimat official stated that the Hare Krishnas were "not accepted as a religion," and that they were dangerous for the country. Independent religious observers, however, believed that the cases are motivated primarily by a financial interest in the land, the value of which has appreciated significantly since 1999. Human rights advocates and international observers brought the issue to the attention of national officials. At the end of the reporting period, the Government had not evicted the residents from the commune and the Hare Krishnas' appeal was pending before the Supreme Court.

Prior to the land confiscation lawsuits, the Hare Krishnas reported tense relations with Karasai akimat authorities, which they believe resulted in the community being subject to frequent inspections. In 2004 the Hare Krishna commune was the subject of eleven inspections by different government agencies including the police, fire protection service, sanitary agency, environment protection agency, and land committee, and subsequently fined for various violations. The Hare Krishnas admitted several violations, which they attempted to rectify but maintained that they had been subjected to closer scrutiny than their neighbors.

Observers believe that security officials informally monitor some religious activity, particularly Muslim imams' sermons; however, no suggestion has been made that any monitoring had the character of interference or harassment.

The Ahmadi Muslim community reported difficulties in obtaining visas and registration for a foreign missionary and his family. In November 2005 foreign missionary Syed Hasan Tahir Bukhari, also known as Asan Takhir Sayid Bukhari, moved from Southern Kazakhstan Oblast to Almaty. His initial application to register in Almaty was denied based on incomplete materials and out-of-date documents. Bukhari was registered in Almaty in May 2006 after government liaison officials assisted the Ahmadis in completing his registration.

Both the national government and the national Muslim organization SAMK deny that there is any official connection between them. However, the Government has sought several times in recent years, in the form of proposed amendments to the religion law, to have the organization

assume a quasi-official role by requiring it to determine which Muslim groups be allowed to register with authorities and to approve the construction of new mosques. In 2002 the Constitutional Council ruled that these provisions of the proposed amendments were unconstitutional; however, several akims were reported to have exerted pressure on imams and mosques to align themselves with the SAMK.

Several religious groups, including unregistered Baptists, Hare Krishnas, and Jehovah's Witnesses, reported that they had been the subject of news accounts portraying them, or nontraditional religions in general, as a threat to security or society. Some of the news accounts appeared in government-controlled media. However, news accounts relating to the April 25, 2006, attempted eviction of Hare Krishnas from their commune were generally sympathetic to the group, including accounts appearing in government-controlled media.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

As in the previous reporting period, there were no reports of prolonged detention of members of religious organizations for proselytizing. On occasion authorities took action against individuals who were not registered as missionaries who were engaged in proselytizing; however, such actions were limited to the confiscation of religious literature, fines, and brief detentions.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Despite legislative setbacks in 2005, the country has outperformed other former Soviet Union nations in its encouragement of religious tolerance and its respect for the rights of religious minorities. Religious leaders praised the role the Government played in ensuring their groups' right to the peaceful practice of religious beliefs. Some perceived the former Chairman of the Secretariat of the Council on Relations with Religious Communities, now the deputy head of the newly organized RIC, and the Ombudsman's Office, as advocates for religious freedom within the Government. In each of the fourteen oblasts, the equivalent of state governments, and in the two cities with independent administrations, Astana and Almaty, the local government (akimat) included a liaison for religious communities. Several of these liaisons were cited by religious groups as a resource for assistance in navigating registration and other laws, while akimat officials in other oblasts were described as unhelpful or intrusive. Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including the Almaty Helsinki Foundation and the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR), assisted religious groups, including providing legal assistance for registration.

National and regional (oblast) officials, including RIC officials, continued to intervene in cases of restriction or harassment of religious groups by local officials. The frequency of higher-level intervention has generally reduced harassment of religious groups at the local level. During the period covered by this report, continued activism by national and regional officials resolved conflicts between nontraditional religious groups and local authorities.

President Nazarbayev announced in September 2003 that he would continue his "Peace and Harmony" initiative by hosting the second Congress of World Religions in Astana in September 2006 and by inviting several previously unrepresented groups. Nazarbayev regularly made public statements highlighting and praising the country's tradition of interethnic and interfaith tolerance. The president remains engaged with international religious leaders and communities.

In June 2006 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs co-hosted an OSCE Implementation Meeting in Almaty on religious tolerance. Religious leaders reported plans to begin building several large houses of worship during the coming year, including a new Russian Orthodox cathedral in Astana, a new synagogue complex in Almaty, and a new synagogue in Ust-Kamenogorsk.

According to government statistics, the number of registered religious groups has risen steadily over the last few years. In January 2006 there were 3,420 groups, compared with 3,259 in 2005 and 3,157 in 2004. The Union of Baptists, for example, grew from 254 registered affiliated groups in 2003 to 272 in 2006.

The Government made efforts to promote religious tolerance in its ranks. Human rights training provided to law enforcement officers by NGOs in cooperation with the Government included information on religious rights under the law.

There were no reports of incidents of anti-Semitism committed by the Government. The country's chief rabbi consistently praised the Government for its proactive protection of the Jewish community. He previously stated publicly that in his more than ten years in the country, he had never faced a single case of anti-Semitism. Other than the actions of members of the extremist HT political movement, who printed and distributed leaflets that supported anti-Semitism among other beliefs, there were no reports of anti-Semitic incitement or acts during the year.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. The country is multiethnic, with a long tradition of tolerance and secularism. Since independence, the number of mosques and churches has increased greatly. The

population, particularly in rural areas, is sometimes wary of nontraditional religions.

In 2004 the media reported a conflict between missionaries from Missionary Center Grace Rakhim and local Muslims in a village in Akmola Oblast. The missionaries, who identified themselves as Presbyterian Christians, were reportedly threatened, beaten, and exiled from the village when they attempted to convert local residents. In general Grace Rakhim Church reported good relations between its missionaries and the community during the reporting period. Akimat officials in Karaganda Oblast, where Grace Church has its national headquarters, invited church leaders to public functions and publicly praised the work of the church during meetings with U.S. embassy officials.

Several members of parliament were quoted in the press expressing suspicion of nontraditional religions, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and Evangelical Christian movements. Leaders of the four traditional religious groups, Islam, Russian Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism, reported general acceptance and tolerance that was not always enjoyed by other minority religious groups. During the reporting period, there were no reports of such mistrust leading to violence.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. officials emphasized that bilateral cooperation on economic and security matters is a complement to, not a substitute for, meaningful progress on human rights, including religious freedom. The ambassador and embassy officers remained engaged in dialogue with the Government to seek assurance that any legislation relating to religious freedom be drafted through a transparent legislative process, and that it reflect the country's international commitments to respect individuals' right to peaceful expression of religion.

U.S. officials expressed concern at high levels over the extremism law prior to its passage in early 2005. Following passage of the law, U.S. officials remained engaged with the Government to encourage that the law be implemented in a manner that least restricted religious practice.

The ambassador and other embassy officials coordinated with other embassies and international human rights organizations to encourage the Government to seek legal expert assistance from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) in drafting implementing regulations for legislation that had implications for the religious community, including the national security amendments that were enacted in July 2005. The ambassador gave several interviews in which he publicly reiterated the U.S. position against legislation that did not appear to meet international standards for protecting religious freedom and other fundamental rights.

Embassy and U.S. Department of State officials visited houses of worship, met with religious leaders, and worked with government officials to address specific cases of concern.

The embassy maintained contact with a broad range of religious communities and reported on violations of their constitutional and human rights. Department of State officials met with government officials and members of faith-based groups in the country, and embassy officials consistently raised cases of local harassment with government officials, who generally worked to resolve these cases, ensuring an equitable application of the law. Senior U.S. government officials met with senior government officials to raise religious freedom concerns. Embassy officials worked to connect religious communities with in-country legal resources to assist with registration concerns.

In his preface to a documentary on Muslims in America by regional broadcaster Mir TV, the ambassador emphasized, "Freedom of religion is one of the most fundamental values of the American way of life," and praised the film for showing the wisdom of community leaders who demonstrated how to separate extremist ideologies from the peaceful observance of the Muslim faith. The documentary was produced by three journalists who traveled to the United States on a U.S. government program in the fall of 2005, where they collected material on Islam in America. In early 2006 the finished product was broadcast on local television news in all CIS countries except Turkmenistan.

The ambassador toured houses of worship and met with religious leaders during trips to regional (oblast) capitals throughout the year. Embassy officials regularly attended public events in support of the religious community, in addition to participating in roundtables and other public debates on matters of religious freedom and tolerance. U.S. officials in the country and in Washington were in regular contact with NGOs that followed religious freedom topics, including the Almaty Helsinki Committee and the Kazakhstan Bureau of International Human Rights and Rule of Law.

In July 2005 the embassy provided grant support to the Youth Center for Support of Democracy to create a Center for Religious Tolerance in Shymkent, the capital of Southern Kazakhstan Oblast, where 30 percent of the country's registered mosques are located. The April 27, 2006, Center opening was attended by leaders from the local religious community and was covered by local media. Members of the community have access to books, reference materials, and other publications about world religions, in addition to materials about sociology, theology, and religious anthropology. The center offers monthly seminars on topics such as the role of religion in democracies and the role of religion in helping resolve social issues; staff members conduct interreligious forums and roundtables with religious and public leaders to discuss urgent social and political questions. In addition, the center provides Internet access for students, teachers, and others doing research on theology and religious tolerance.

In 2004 the U.S. government added a religious component to its overall development strategy for the country. Implementing organizations and a regional religion, state and society (RSS) specialist, based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, have been working to increase outreach to religious communities in Shymkent. During the reporting period, the RSS specialist toured Shymkent with religious leaders and continued to publicize the scope of implementing organizations' contributions, including civil society development, which these partners provide. In addition, embassy officials held meetings with implementing organizations and staff to encourage partners to reach out to local religious leaders in their work, where appropriate. In June 2006 the U.S. government sponsored the participation of a government official and several

local Muslim leaders in a regional conference on "The Role of Religion in Promoting Peace and Stability," held in Tajikistan.

During the period covered by this report, the embassy conducted exchange programs for religious leaders and human rights observers, and cosponsored several reunions for alumni of past exchange programs. These included Muslim religious leaders and teachers who attended programs in 2003 and 2004 on "Islam in America" that included tours of U.S. cities and meetings with American religious leaders.

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