

# State hostility to religious movements of foreign origin in Kazakhstan

## *HRWF statement at the OSCE/ODIHR HDIM in Warsaw*

HRWF (15.09.2017) -

### **Human Rights Without Frontiers recommends that the Kazakh authorities**

- Grant full religious freedom to Kazakh citizens adhering to the teachings of peaceful religious movements of foreign origin: freedom of association, freedom of worship and assembly, freedom to share their beliefs;
- Allow non-Kazakh citizens to fully enjoy their religious freedom during their stay in the country and to not deport them;
- Cease the prosecution of believers who peacefully share their beliefs with others under the charge of "Incitement of social, national, clan, racial, or religious discord" (Criminal Code Article 174, Part 2)
- Release all religious prisoners of conscience sentenced on the basis of this Criminal Code Article;
- Lift the ban on the peaceful Tablighi Jamaat movement.

According to the latest report of the US State Department on religious freedom in Kazakhstan, religious groups that the government considered 'traditional' reported general acceptance and tolerance by the government. However, 'nontraditional' religious groups, such as followers of Tablighi Jamaat, Jehovah's Witnesses, and foreign believers, continued to experience heightened scrutiny and prosecution.

### ***Tablighi Jamaat Muslims***

As of 1st July 2017, fifty-nine Sunni Muslims who are followers of the peaceful Tablighi Jamaat movement have been given criminal convictions since December 2014. More than forty of these cases have been documented by *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, in our global Database of Religious Prisoners.

Most recently, in the summer of 2017, the Tekeli Court in Almaty Region jailed Iliyan Raiymzhan for thirty months for alleged membership of the banned Muslim movement Tablighi Jamaat.

Tablighi Jamaat is a peaceful missionary movement within Islam, founded in India in the early 20th century. Although it has no formal membership, adherents spend significant periods of time travelling and preaching in mosques to spread their message. They do not commit or advocate violence or terrorism.

The annual World Gathering in Tongi, Bangladesh, (called Bishwa Ijtima) is the most popular Tablighi Jamaat pilgrimage in the world with approximately five million people attending each year, significantly larger than the traditional Hajj to Mecca.

### ***Jehovah's Witnesses***

On 29 June 2017, a court in Kazakhstan ordered the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Almaty, Kazakhstan, to suspend operations for three months and fined them approximately \$2,100 USD.

Leading up to the court decision, authorities conducted a raid of the branch property which involved an intimidating force of some forty armed officers.

Because of their missionary activities, Teymur AKHMEDOV was sentenced in 2017 to five years in prison and Asaf Guliyev to five years restricted freedom.

In the name of tolerance, the Kazakh authorities accused them of "Incitement of social, national, clan, racial, or religious discord by repeat 'offenders' with prison terms of between five and ten years" (Criminal Code Article 174, Part 2) for allegedly advocating the superiority of their religious movement.

Jehovah's Witnesses are a peaceful religious movement of American origin which develops intense missionary activity in all the countries of the world. Their members are opposed to violence and are conscientious objectors to military service.

### ***Deportation of foreign missionaries***

This year, several foreigners were ordered to be deported for participating in so-called illegal missionary activities.

A Canadian citizen pastoring a church in New York, Hae Taik Kim, was deported from the country for holding baptisms with a Kazakh Baptist pastor.

A Muslim, Bakhtiyorkhon Soliyev, was deported back to Tajikistan for participating in missionary activities in Kazakhstan.

In other cases, foreigners managed to overturn their deportation order in court. For example: In April, the Almaty City Court overturned a fine and deportation order on an Indian citizen and long-time resident in Kazakhstan, Ayothi Daniel Gunaseelan. A lower court had found him guilty of 'missionary activity'. However, the fine and three-month ban on the Church for meeting in a location the authorities had not approved was not overturned.

I thank you for your attention.