

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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Kazakhstan General Prosecutor's Office stands up for religious freedom

Kazakhstan—With today's decision, the supervisory collegium of the Kyzylorda Regional Court has restored religious freedom for Jehovah's Witnesses in the Kyzylorda Region. This decision came following protests initiated by the General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Earlier this year, the courts in Kyzylorda, Shymkent and Saryagash ordered the activity of local Jehovah's Witness communities to be suspended for six months because they had gathered for worship outside the official addresses of their legally registered organizations. The Kazakhstan Constitution, the Law on Religion and the legally registered charters of Jehovah's Witnesses' communities provide for conducting religious gatherings in a variety of locations, not at the legal address only. In its decision today, the supervisory collegium annulled the suspension order for the Kyzylorda community. The Southern Kazakhstan Regional Court was scheduled to review the cases of the Shymkent and Saryagash communities also today but decided to adjourn the hearing until November 20, 2008.

Robert Shiebelgut, the chairman of the Shymkent community, said: "We are happy that our fellow believers in the Kyzylorda Region can again meet for their religious meetings freely, and we hope that the court in Shymkent will make a similar decision next week. We were convinced that our fellow believers had not committed any crime when they met at a private house, and we're very satisfied that this was confirmed by the court today."

These positive developments follow the directions from the Kazakhstan General Prosecutor's Office. On October 28, 2008, the Religious Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Republic of Kazakhstan received a letter from the General Prosecutor's Office informing them about the supervisory protests. The letter stated that the General Prosecutor had ordered the regional prosecutor offices in the Southern Kazakhstan and Kyzylorda regions to "take measures to protest" the court decisions against Jehovah's Witnesses. It also advised the regional prosecutor's offices as well as their subordinates that they "should not allow violations of the religious rights of people." According to the General Prosecutor's Office, having religious gatherings outside the legal address does not in itself constitute any violation of the law. In one of its recent decisions, the Almaty Regional Court came to the same conclusion.

Jehovah's Witnesses rejoice over the upright stand taken by the Kazakhstan General Prosecutor's Office and the supervisory collegium of the Kyzylorda Regional Court protecting the right for religious freedom guaranteed by the Kazakhstan Constitution.

Contacts:

Polat Bekzhan, telephone: +7 727 226 33 63

Religious Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Republic of Kazakhstan

Gregory Olds, telephone: +1-646-269-3464

Philip Brumley, telephone: 1-(845) 306-0711

Office of General Counsel for Jehovah's Witnesses

Watch Tower, 25 Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, New York 11201-2483 U.S.A.

Telephone: 718 560 5600 Facsimile: 718 560 5619

www.jw-media.org