



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report by the Head of Center in Astana, Ivar Vikki

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 7, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Vikki, welcome back to Vienna. The United States and our delegation very much appreciate your dedication and hard work during your tenure in Kazakhstan.

Your appearance at the Permanent Council today is a timely one. Just over two months ago in Madrid, OSCE participating States chose Kazakhstan to lead our organization in 2010. We have congratulated Kazakhstan, and also have welcomed the statement made by Foreign Minister Tazhin at that time regarding Kazakhstan's commitment to undertake key domestic reforms in preparing for the Chairmanship. He also pledged to support the mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and to ensure robust NGO involvement in the OSCE. As the first Central Asian State to serve as Chairman-in-Office, Kazakhstan has a unique opportunity to focus the organization's attention on this important region. Ambassador Vikki, we believe that your report - in which you address the commitments made by Foreign Minister Tazhin - is both excellent and comprehensive.

The United States now looks to Kazakhstan to implement the commitments it made in Madrid. This will strengthen the OSCE and will bolster democratic institutions in Kazakhstan that are the foundation for long-term stability and prosperity.

While the responsibility for implementing these reforms rests with the Government of Kazakhstan, the OSCE Center can provide valuable assistance. We support the Center's work aimed at raising awareness on OSCE activities and training government officials to help Kazakhstan better prepare for the 2010 Chairmanship. The United States is also contributing to this effort through training for Kazakhstani officials through the Marshall Center and other venues. However, logistical preparations are only a part of gearing up for a successful Chairmanship.

Given the pledges made in Madrid by the Government of Kazakhstan in support of OSCE principles, we believe our Mission can and should be active in supporting Kazakhstan to meet those pledges and exemplify the commitments, values and standards that this Organization stands for. We were disappointed to hear the criticism leveled by President Nazarbayev at missionary organizations operating in Kazakhstan, as well as his suggestion for new legislation aimed at limiting those missionary activities. Comments of this sort not only damage Kazakhstan's reputation for inter-religious and inter-ethnic tolerance, they also run counter to norms on religious freedom that all OSCE participating States have committed to uphold at home.

Reports of alleged harassment of small minority religious groups, including the Baptist Council of Churches and the Grace Presbyterian Church, are also worrisome. We urge the Center to continue its cooperation with the Committee on Religious Affairs, in ongoing work on a new draft law on freedom of religion and religious associations.

The United States supports the Center's continued emphasis on working with Government of Kazakhstan to draft laws on elections and media that will meet OSCE commitments, and to promote greater transparency in the legislative process. We commend the Center for its robust election observation program and for raising youth awareness of electoral issues.

We urge the Government of Kazakhstan to work closely with the Center and the Representative on Freedom of the Media to address media freedom issues more effectively, both in legislation and in practice.

Ambassador Vikki, we are pleased that you and your team intend to coordinate the Center's activities in support of promised reform in Kazakhstan. As always, the United States stands prepared to assist the OSCE and the Government of Kazakhstan in meeting its commitments.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.