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Conditions for religious freedom declined sharply in Kazakhstan during the reporting period. In October 2011, President Nazarbaev signed two new laws regarding freedom of religion or belief. The laws garnered strong criticism from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which Kazakhstan chaired in 2010, as well as from domestic civil society and religious communities. The restrictive new religion law establishes a complex four-tiered registration system, bans unregistered religious activity, imposes compulsory religious censorship, and requires both central and local government approval to build or open new places of worship. All registered religious organizations must re-register under strict new criteria or face liquidation by the courts. While registered religious organizations may teach their faith to their own members, only regional and national registered religious organizations can train clergy in officially-approved institutions. Despite official pressure on religious groups to stop activity immediately until they re-register by October 25, 2011, which was four months ago, re-registration regulations have not been adopted. In early 2012, 579 small religious groups (with less than 50 adult citizen members) were stripped of registration. In February 2012, in the first known use of expanded penalties, a leader of an unregistered Baptist community in eastern Kazakhstan was fined a year and a half's average local wages (equivalent to U.S. \$ 3,273).

Even before the new Kazakh religion law came into effect, police acted against disfavored religious groups. In October 2011, police raided a worship meeting of a registered Protestant church in Atyrau, due to a new legal requirement restricting activity to its legal address. Also in October, authorities detained Jehovah's Witnesses in Almaty because the new religion law bans public missionary activity. In November 2011, Kazakh officials closed mosques, churches, and Muslim and Russian Orthodox prayer rooms in prisons and social care institutions, due to a new ban on religious activity in state institutions. Registered religious community branches affiliated with Central Grace Presbyterian Church in Karaganda and the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Astana were officially warned to halt activity and return registration certificates. The head of Kazakhstan's registered Baptist Union told Forum 18 that their small communities across the country had received similar warnings. The Church of Scientology reported two members were found guilty for unregistered religious activity and police raided church properties. Kazakhstan's Agency of Religious Affairs actively supports "anti-sect centers," which promote intolerance against disfavored religious communities.

The regional Agency for Religious Affairs instructed the independent but registered Abai

District Mosque in the Karaganda region to re-register by February 14 or it would close the mosque, but it is unknown if any action has been taken. The government-sponsored Muslim Board issued a *fatwa* declaring Almaty's small Ahmadi community "infidels," which state-controlled media promoted. The Ahmadi mosque in Almaty and the Grace Presbyterian Church near Turkestan are both facing challenges from local prosecutor's offices as to whether they can be used as places of worship. Kazakhstan's leading human rights activist, Evgeny Zhovtis, was released from a labor colony on February 17, 2012 after serving more than half of his four-year sentence for involuntary vehicular manslaughter. His case was widely viewed by human rights advocates as having been manipulated to prevent him from vocal human rights activity during Kazakhstan's OSCE chairmanship in 2010.
