



ASIA/KAZAKHSTAN - New law on religions, the Church stays proceedings

Astana (Agenzia Fides) - The Catholic Church "pays attention on important issues such as religious freedom, that concerns the life of the Church", but stays proceedings on the proposed new law that regulates the life of religious communities in Kazakhstan, "waiting to know what the details of the bill are, which will be examined by Parliament": this is what His Exc. Mgr. Tomas Peta, Archbishop of Astana tells Fides, speaking of the proposed new law on religions, which arrived yesterday in the Kazakh Parliament, entitled "Law on religious activities and religious associations".

According to observers, the new bill in its current form, involves a complex system of four levels of registration for religious communities; a ban on unregistered religious activity; the closure of places of worship that do not have specific authorization; a dual approval (of the central and local administration) to open new ones. The Law – is formed by two separate measures – it expands the spectrum of possible "violations" and therefore sanctions, regarding the regulation of religious communities.

The measures were drawn up by the new government Agency for Religious Affairs, led by Kairat Lama Sharif, and signed by Prime Minister Karim Masimov, who presented them for the approval of Parliament, where the party "Light of the Fatherland", of which Masimov and President Nursultan Nazarbayev are members, hold the majority.

Mgr. Peta remarks: "The discussion has just begun, it will take time. Being a Catholic Church we have not yet received the official version of the bill, so we had no way of expressing our opinion. From the rumors that circulate, the President's aim is to fight extremism and religious fundamentalism. We will see and wait before judging. We will pay special attention to a subject that touches our lives".

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) told the agency "Forum18", specialized in religious freedom issues, that the Kazakh government has not asked for its assistance or a legal opinion on the bill. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 07/09/2011)