



Remarks at Meeting with Senate Speaker Nurtai Abykayev

Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State

Parliament of Kazakhstan

Astana, Kazakhstan

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Armitage: Thank you Mister Speaker. It's a great honor to be here. In the last year or so several of my friends visited here and were able to drop by my office and help me learn a little bit more about what's going on in Kazakhstan. (inaudible...) Perhaps I'll have a few questions for you.

I have one or two things I'd like to thank you for. First, and especially, Article 98, which you passed, enormously aids us. I also want to express gratitude on behalf of the Government of the United States for the deployment of your military explosive ordnance disposal soldiers in Iraq. It's so important to us, we realize this is a dangerous environment and we very much appreciate the courage they've shown.

If you would allow me, Mr. Speaker, to ask a few questions, I'll start by asking what the status of the law on extremism is, and perhaps also, if you can give me an idea of what sort of matters the Senate gets involved in.

Mr. Speaker, I remember well a conversation in my office and discussion about the 2006 Religious Forum, and I admire very much the comment you made a few minutes ago about welcoming experts from the OSCE to look at this law on extremism. The reason I say that is, you have great responsibilities to protect your citizens and your nation. And you're trying to do that with this law. At the same time, you have just acknowledged your responsibilities to confessional groups and ethnic groups and so trying to balance the two is a very tough, but very necessary thing. So I admire so much the confidence and readiness to welcome outside experts. Beyond that, I wonder if you might give me a sense, if you will, of the political atmosphere here in Kazakhstan. How active are Kazakh citizens in political affairs. It's a new, relatively new, phenomenon.

Mr. Speaker, given the difficulties in our 2000 elections, and even the fact that, ahead, of our elections of next Tuesday, we have in some states three or four thousand lawyers already assembled to contest the results before they're even known. I understand your comments about the problems of (inaudible) ... democracy. But, it would seem to me, the fact that political and economic openness of which you speak - you talk about another round of democratic reforms coming forth - that all this rapid development might be a little intimidating, or threatening, to certain of your neighbors. What would be your opinion about that?

Because of the combination of geography, land size and initiative, the U.S. considers Kazakhstan a leader in Central Asia.

I think we have another appointment. I'm so grateful that you've spent time with my colleagues and me. I'm delighted to see you again and I wish you the very best.

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