

# Kazakhstan president welcomes bishops of Central Asia at first meeting

NUR-SULTAN, Kazakhstan (CNS) – Kazakhstan’s president conveyed good wishes to the participants of the first meeting of the newly created Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Central Asia in the capital of Nur-Sultan.

The press service of the Kazakh Senate reported that President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev sent the Senate chairman, Maulen Ashimbayev, to the April 27-29 meeting to deliver his message.

Ashimbayev said the president was aware that the bishops’ meeting was held during the yearlong observance of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and the Holy See, ucanews.com reported.

He quoted St. John Paul II, who during his 2001 visit to Kazakhstan focused on the common goal of being “peacemakers because a society firmly founded on peace is a society with a future.”

The message also called Pope Francis’ planned visit to Kazakhstan in September a “historic and unique” event that confirms the country’s status as a reliable platform for interreligious and inter-civilization dialogue.

The pope plans to participate in the seventh World Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions scheduled for Sept. 14-15 in Nur-Sultan.

The Vatican established the CBCCA in September to help bishops throughout Central Asia respond to common challenges and to ensure mutual support as they address them.

The first CBCCA meeting included discussions of pastoral

priorities for local churches as well as preparations for the pope's visit. Catholic bishops and Church officials from 10 countries, including Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, attended the meeting.

Kazakhstan is the largest of the nations, with most of its estimated 15 million citizens being Muslims. Christians, who are largely members of Orthodox Church, make up the largest religious minority. Catholics are estimated to be number about 250,000, most being of Polish, German and Lithuanian origin who moved to Kazakhstan following their deportation from the Soviet Union.

Over the years, the Vatican and Kazakhstan have built a partnership based on shared values and aspirations, such as the protection of human dignity and the promotion of religious pluralism and global solidarity, Ashimbayev told the bishops.

He noted that Catholics and other believers have made significant contributions in the country and helped promote its image globally as a modern nation that sustains tolerance and mutual understanding among different religions and ethnic groups.

"Kazakhstan and the Vatican have considerable potential for further cooperation," he said. "I am confident that bilateral relations will be further strengthened through various educational, cultural, social and humanitarian initiatives and projects."