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OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING 2007

EU Statement for the Working Session 4:

Fundamental Freedoms I

26th September, Warsaw

In working sessions 2 and 3, we extensively discussed the subject of combating intolerance and discrimination and of promoting mutual respect and understanding. The OSCE has devoted much time and energy to these important subjects. At the same time, the OSCE is an advocate of the protection of freedom of religion or belief. There is no other international organisation with more detailed standards in this area than the OSCE. The EU would thus also wish to include as a central element of our discussions, the issue of freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.

In the past year, the number of violations of the freedom of religion and belief in the OSCE region has not diminished.

In particular, problems have arisen regarding the right to build and maintain places of worship. For example, in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, places of worship were closed and private gatherings of believers were disturbed. This is particularly worrisome since for most believers it is essential to be able to meet with their co-believers and to join in prayer and other forms of liturgy. They cannot do so without meeting places. For these reasons, the EU urges all OSCE participating States to live up to their obligations and to guarantee to all religious communities the freedom to build and maintain places of worship.

In 2006, the EU statement on freedom of religion and belief also addressed the issue of registration. Unfortunately, problems relating to the registration of religious communities persist. Based on what has been agreed in the framework of the OSCE, the EU maintains the view that although it may be useful to register religious communities for practical purposes, such registration practices should never form a prerequisite to exercise the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief in community with others.

Discrimination based on religion or belief is another area which merits our continued and specific attention. In this respect, it is important that not only do States refrain from direct discrimination of certain religious communities, but also that they protect such communities against violent attacks and discrimination by other groups or individuals. For example in the Russian Federation violence against religious minorities has also increased. It is essential that governments take measures to prevent such violence, to investigate and to bring perpetrators to justice, while offering immediate and full protection to the religious communities concerned.

The EU commends ODIHR and its Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief for their important work during the past year. At the same time, the EU is concerned about the resources attributed to the freedom of religion or belief within ODIHR itself. In particular, ODIHR might wish to establish a balance between the resources reserved for the support of the Personal Representatives on Tolerance and those reserved for work in the area of freedom of religion and belief, including the support for the OSCE-Panel of Experts.

These days, religion is often in the news: frequently, these references relate to religious violence or hatred. However, that should not make us lose sight of the fact that religions and beliefs are often of fundamental significance for their adherents. The freedom of religion and belief should therefore remain a priority for all of us and the EU calls upon the OSCE to step up the activities for its protection, both by ensuring enough resources within ODIHR and by organising special meetings on the freedom of religion and belief.

The Candidate Countries Turkey and Croatia^{*}, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, EFTA country Norway, member of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova align themselves with this statement.

^{*} Croatia continues to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.