

Foreword

From the outset, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has concerned itself with the issue of freedom of religion **or belief**, aware of the destabilizing effect of the denial of this basic human right.

Commitments on freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief were first enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, and have been repeatedly reaffirmed and expanded substantially in subsequent OSCE documents.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), as the main human dimension institution of the OSCE, is responsible for fostering implementation of these commitments. In order to further these efforts, an Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief was established under the auspices of the ODIHR in 1996. I welcome the decision of state authorities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to avail of the panel's expertise in their recent attempts to legislate on this contentious area.

In the past year, the threat posed by fundamentalism has been tragically highlighted. The fact that countries where human rights and civil liberties are denied provide a fertile environment for the growth of terrorism has been increasingly recognized. The dangers of intolerance and discrimination and of alienating practising believers and driving them to armed extremism are clear.

On a positive note, in that time, the ODIHR has also been able to facilitate increased consultation between authorities and representatives of religions and civil society generally in almost all of the participating States in Central Asia. The fostering of such dialogue and consultation between governments and civil society has been a central goal of the ODIHR in its activities in the region. It is only by dialogue and consultation that workable practices and procedures can be achieved for the benefit of all in society.

This conference marks a further step in this process. It is hoped that it will serve to stimulate dialogue, understanding **and tolerance** between religions and Governments, as well as between religions and beliefs themselves.

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