

Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

WORKING SESSION 15

Fundamental Freedoms II, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

As delivered by

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Ms. Moderator,

We would like to draw the attention of the distinguished audience to the urgent issue of protection of Christian as well as other religious minorities in the immediate OSCE neighbourhood, in Syria and Iraq, which are facing existential threats.

Christians and other religious minorities, including Yazidis, Alevis and others are subject to massacres and other crimes against humanity by religious extremists, such as ISIL, Al Nusra Front and other terrorist organizations, affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Grave crimes against humanity in regard to Christians are taking place in the same areas, where a century back Christian nations were subjected to Genocide. In September 2014 the sanctuary for the remains of many victims of the Armenian Genocide, the Saint Martyrs Armenian Church, in Syrian town of Deir el-Zor was destroyed by terrorists in a sad, yet symbolic link between past and present crimes against humanity.

In recent years the Christian population in Middle East has decreased drastically. With perishing and mass exodus of Christians from the region ages-old traditions of interfaith dialogue and tolerance are being lost. Destruction of cultural masterpieces is an attempt to erase the memory of other people, destroy millennia-old cultures and civilizations.

The Delegation of Armenia has regularly raised the issue of the urgent need for the protection of religious minorities in Syria at the level of Ministerial and Permanent Councils and during relevant international conferences. The urgency of the issue and its high relevance for the security of the OSCE area was widely acknowledged by speakers and participants of the Conference on enhancing efforts to prevent and combat intolerance and discrimination against Christians, focusing on hate crimes, exclusion, marginalisation and denial of rights, which was held in Vienna in May this year.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has addressed this issue in its Baku Declaration, adopted in 2014 by calling upon OSCE participating States to prevent the use of their territories by terrorist and fundamentalist groups for cross-border attacks against civilian populations, including religious and ethnic minorities in Syria. In Helsinki Declaration, adopted this year, the PA acknowledged important role that parliamentarians play in efforts to prevent genocide by condemning past genocides

and raising their voices against ongoing massive and grave human rights violations, particularly against Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities in Syria and Iraq. The PA strongly condemned persecution and violence against Christians and other religious minorities in the OSCE area and beyond, including in the Middle East and North Africa, and actions that limit their right to religious freedom and to practise their faith;

The Delegation of Armenia would like to underline the need to combat religious extremism and radicalization in the OSCE region with the aim to ensure freedom of religion or belief in the territory of the OSCE participating States and their neighbourhood.

In this regard we would like to make the following recommendations:

- Prevent the use of territory of OSCE participating States by terrorist organizations, including Al-Nusra Front and ISIL for cross-border attacks of religious minorities in Syria and Iraq.
- Strengthen the commitments of OSCE participating States to combat violent extremism based on the religious grounds against individuals and religious communities.
- Address the issue of restitution and compensation for the religious property through dialogue and consultation between governmental bodies and religious or belief communities
- Adopt measures to promote full respect for and protection of places of worship, religious sites, symbols and cemeteries.
- Investigate effectively, promptly and impartially and punish acts of violence motivated by intolerance against Christians regardless of the perpetrator.
- Assist participating states in education on and remembrance of the genocides and crimes against humanity perpetrated against Christians.
- Highlight patterns on intolerance and discrimination including with regard of past grave crimes perpetrated against Christians in order to better understand and proactively address intolerance and discrimination against Christians

Reply to Turkey

Ms. Moderator,

The fact that the territory of Turkey is extensively used by fundamentalist terrorist groups who attack religious minorities in Syria and Iraq is not an Armenian invention. The numerous accounts of the Turkish politicians, Turkish civil society and media, community and religious leaders, video materials and eventually thousand eyewitnesses, as well as ongoing trials in this regard clearly establish that the terrorist groups used the territory of Turkey. We regret that Turkey does not recognize the existence of this problem. This unconstructive attitude may indicate that Turkey prefers to be a part of the problem rather than solution.

In our view, the country who portrays itself as defender of the rights of one religious group in Europe could have shown more constructive attitude towards other religious groups in Middle East who are currently subject of mass atrocities.

In regard to the remarks of the Delegation of Turkey on the Armenian Genocide we would like to stress that Turkey has better choice than to associate itself with perpetrators of genocide.

Thank you.