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## ***Rights to Freedom of conscience, religion and expression***

Ladies and Gentlemen!

On top of all, I would like warmly to greet you on behalf of Azerbaijani Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (AIDHR) and express my pleasure to attend today's meeting. Taking this opportunity, I want to present to your consideration outcomes of the monitoring we conducted with a specially emphasize on freedom of religion in the South Caucasus region.

As you must know, South Caucasus is one of the geographic regions with the ancient civilizations and every now and then various religions dominated in the area. Even today the region can be a good example for the indication of its religious tolerance. Suffice to say that several religions, in particular Christianity and Islam are in harmony in the region. I would like especially note Azerbaijani policy pursued in this regard. This country could manage to astonish all visitors because of its unique religious tolerance. Although majority of population is muslims, Azerbaijan is the country where Christians, Jews and believers of other religions can live in an environment of peace and mutual respect. One can easily observe Churches, Mosques and Synagogues next to one another in capital Baku. In conjunction with the studies we held, we found out that from time to time some attempts were made to ignite clash among the believers of various religions. This very reason accounts for the Azerbaijani geopolitical location surrounded by different countries.

The environment of religious tolerance secured by the official Baku deeply disappointed those forces interested in confrontation between Jews and Muslims.

In this regard, I want to recall especially provocateurs who were arrested prior to Eurovision Song contest held in Baku in 2012. Due to systematic work carried out by law enforcers a group that intended to explode Embassy of Israel and Synagogues in Baku was neutralized. Terrorist group that recently emerged in Syria and made bloodshed in the name of Islam State seeks to worsen harmony of religious tolerance in South Caucasus and it raise another concern. We are receiving information regarding how Islam State activists influenced religious circles in Azerbaijan. In this way they recruited ordinary people and took them to Iraq and Syria via Turkey. Up until now several Azerbaijanis died during the waged war in Iraq. On the other hand, activist of Islamic State conduct propagation in Azerbaijan, stand against Shia Muslims and try to upset relations among the various religion believers. We express our concern over the recruitment carried out by terrorist group which acts in the name of Islam and threatens whole world.

Armenia can be a proper example of a country in South Caucasus where religious tolerance is highly worsened. As a consequence of thought-out policies in Armenia tedious environment is shaped in the country. Just imagine, 95 percent of population in Armenia is ethnic Armenians while 98 percent is Apostolic church Christians. These figures are clear evidence of exacerbated religious tolerance in the country. Intolerance towards other religions, particularly muslims became prevalent in Armenian society. As a result of this attitude, over the early 90s Armenians have demolished all existed mosques, religious monuments or turned them into Christian centers in the occupied Azerbaijani territories, especially in Upper Karabagh and 7 adjacent regions. It really shocks us while reviewing photos and videos taken by foreign journalists in Upper Karabagh.

Armenian government blew up all historical mosques and instead constructed churches. I would like to bring to your attention historical fact which might be incredible for many of you. During the military operations between 1991-199 years in Upper Karabagh a group composed of religious leaders of Armenian Apostolic church who were entrusted to demolish, blow up mosques and religious monuments in the territories

occupied by Armenian armed forces. Can you imagine, instead of prying to God a priest picks up weapon and demolish holly building, places belonging to other religions, blows up God's house. It's indeed disappointing!

Taking into account all these it becomes evident that existing religious discrimination in Armenian is shaped by apostolic church and this attitude targeted not only Muslims but also other religious sects. We are all well aware of the violation committed against representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses (religious sect) in Armenia. Even today 75 members of this religious sect still remain in prisons on various accusations. Their rights to freedom of assembly, religion, disseminating their religion in a peaceful manner is strictly limited. On the other hand, journalists who intend to highlight these facts face prosecution and penalties.

Dissemination of other religions in Armenian is hindered not only by the amendments made by official Erevan in legislation but also hatred shaped through the demonstrations, street march initiated by the government. To put it in a more clear way, series of demonstrations have been held against believers of other religions under the initiation of ruling power in Yerevan, donations are rendered to Armenian Apostolic churches to further continue prosecution and brutal violation toward other religions supporters.

Ultimately, number of people who move from Armenia is on the rise and believers of other religions flee to other countries because of the pressure, prosecution employed by the state and religious circles.

I would like also briefly inform you about the same situation in Georgia. Although, ensuring religious freedom is encouraging in the country, some minor religious confrontations occur here. Through the various methods priests attempt to convert dwellers of village that densely populated by Muslims to Christianity and it causes unrest among the people. Georgia can be ranked in the second place after Azerbaijan in terms of ensuring religious tolerance.

Caucasian Muslim Board that located in Baku has a representation in Georgia and this very fact is a clear cut evidence of the religious dialogue among the South Caucasus countries.