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**Session 1**

Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims:  
Old prejudices and new targets

**Check against delivery**

**Statement made by Ambassador Olof Ehrenkrona, the  
Swedish delegation to the OSCE Chairmanship Conference  
on “Intolerance and Discriminations against Muslims”,  
Cordoba the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2007.**

This Conference here in Cordoba October 2007 is the fifth High Level political meeting within the OSCE framework dealing with issues regarding the combat of discrimination and promotion of mutual respect and understanding in our countries. On this particular meeting we will discuss different aspects on intolerance and discriminations against Muslims.

The subject is certainly of great importance. In all OSCE countries there are different kinds of tensions between individuals and groups with diverse religious believes or between religious and secular communities. While a secular state often is considered an important element in upholding the principles of freedom of thought and religious belief, there are also those who feel themselves offended or even discriminated when secularism in society is manifested in daily life or in the public debate.

There are many examples when freedom of thought and speech and the artistic freedoms, all fundamental human rights in open and free societies, are used in ways that cultural or religious minorities find intolerant and offending. In a mobile world with

a steady rise of immigration, tourism and intercultural exchange such sentiments will certainly grow. But so will also our mutual understanding as well as our abilities to cope with such tensions.

In Scandinavia, during the last couple of years there have been intense discussions about the conflicts that sometimes could be seen between on the one hand artistic freedom and freedom of speech and on the other hand the principles of tolerance and respect for other people's beliefs and values that are also necessary parts of an open society.

We all live in countries where people of different faiths must be able to live together side by side in an atmosphere of tolerance and respect. And in most European countries this is possible and the order of the day. We have a tradition of religious freedom and of everyone's right to practice and enjoy respect for their faith.

The Swedish state is secular in a country with a majority of its inhabitants having a Christian heritage and secularism in this respect means that all authorities are being impartial in all issues regarding people's faith. No persecution of religious minorities is of course allowed. On the contrary we look upon it as an asset to being open to the world around us. We welcome diversity in culture and religion and every member of society has the right to determine their own religious affiliation and religious practice, and similarly also the right to stand outside all faith communities.

The foundation of this, a social model we share with many others, must always be mutual respect and understanding, but also a desire for joint repudiation of offensive acts as well as acts of violence and aggression.

In today's Sweden, Islam is a natural part of life. It is a part of the diversity of different faiths and cultures that has become such an important aspect of Sweden's identity. There are today approximately 400 000 – 500 000 individuals coming from Muslim countries living in Sweden, slightly less than five

percent of the total population. About 80 000 are registered in one of the Muslims associations. We don't know how many individuals who practise Islam since we don't register people's faith. But in a city like Malmo no other religious community is drawing more worshippers to their religious prayers or services.

Seen from an international perspective we strongly believe in a vital and positive dialogue with Islam and we try to contribute to such a dialogue via our institutes in Istanbul and Alexandria. We are proud of our long and strong academic traditions in this area and we strongly support the political, religious and cultural dialogue on all levels in our society. Dialogue is the best way to create mutual understanding and mutual understanding in itself is the best way to fight discrimination and intolerance.

Islam is fully and without reservations respected as a religion in Sweden and all Muslims have got the same rights to express their beliefs as anyone else living in Sweden. All Muslim men and women are free to practice their faith, they have a rightful place in the Swedish society and the same right as everybody else to build their lives and shape their individual destinies.

If freedom of religion and the right to be respected for ones faith make up one part of our social model, then democracy along with our freedom of expression and of the press, are other indispensable parts. These are freedoms laid down in our constitution and they prohibit the government to take action against what is published in the press. All such actions, in the very rare number of cases when the law is violated, must only be taken by the judicial authorities.

This does not mean that we are forbidden to discuss the consequences of freedom of expression and artistic freedom when individuals feel offended. Our freedom to make our voice heard applies equally for everyone including these who feel themselves insulted, hurt or offended.

When the will to provoke prevail over the will for dialogue, and this is sadly to often the case, the provocations are of course

open for criticism in a free and open debate. And it is perfectly legitimate to state that such provocations jeopardize the opportunity for understandings and meetings between different cultures and religions.

From our experience based on the latest discussions starting with the publication in a daily newspaper of an individual Swedish artist's installation, the dialogue as such can prevent misunderstandings and prejudices to grow within the society.

Dialogue is the democratic and peaceful way forward in developing our societies and reforming our institutions. The alternative, top down monologue by the autocrats or the choice of violence by the desperate outsiders, could never be a base for tolerance and understanding.

Bearing in mind our own very recent experiences in a situation when fundamental human rights were if not really challenged so at least questioned, I can only testify the important role an open dialogue can play to bridge value gaps and overcome political tensions. Tolerance, understanding and non-discrimination will always be a matter of attitudes, a result of how people think, of their perceptions and ideas, their beliefs and knowledge of others.

Done properly dialogue should be inclusive and a stepping stone for the most important integration process of all in the modern, mobile and globalized world – the integration on freedom and tolerance into people's minds.

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