

**EUROPEAN PLATFORM ON RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION AND
INTOLERANCE**

**OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and on other forms of intolerance
Cordoba June 8 and 9, 2005**

**Intervention by Joanna Chellapermal
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Madame Chairperson,

We are grateful for the opportunity to address the distinguished delegates gathered here in Cordoba. I am speaking on behalf of the European Platform on Religious Discrimination and Intolerance, a loose coalition of NGO's and religious groups from all faith backgrounds, established to co-operate in promoting concern within European Union institutions for religious freedom violations.

Since the Helsinki Final Act, freedom of religion and belief has been one of key commitments OSCE member states have agreed to adhere to. We therefore fully support the stressing of implementation of the existing commitments of OSCE member states in this area. Despite all efforts though, religious freedom violations continue to be one of key human rights violations in the OSCE area. As previous delegates have mentioned, we should bear in mind that at least an estimated 85 percent of the world population adheres to some form of religion.

Addressing religious freedom violations has become particularly difficult and complex as it is often linked to security concerns regarding activities of extremist religious groups.

Also, raising concerns regarding religious freedom violations affecting Christian communities in some OSCE countries is faced with difficulties. In particularly OSCE European member states, this often produces criticism from various bodies critical (and to some extent intolerant) of Christianity, or their perception of it, and what they see as its 'past crimes' and thereby distracting from the very real concerns of religious freedom violations against Christian religious groups.

We, as members of the European Platform on Religious Discrimination and Intolerance, have some reservations regarding the recent developments within OSCE on addressing religious discrimination issues.

Whilst we welcome the appointment of the Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also

focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions, we feel that to some extent this signifies a relegation of religious discrimination and intolerance into a relatively minor concern. Even with the best of intentions it is impossible to effectively address the rapidly growing concerns regarding religious discrimination whilst at the same time focusing on such a multitude of other issues.

Also identification of this issue specifically with 'Christians and members of other religions' is unhelpful for the above mentioned reasons.

We believe that it is crucial that freedom of religion and belief should remain a key concern for the OSCE. As a human right, it is an important litmus test for other rights and freedoms, democracy and tolerance in any society as it cannot exist without respect for other human rights such as freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom of press.

An environment which denies legitimate and moderate expressions of religious faith can breed more extremist religious sentiments which can have a negative impact on tolerance in the society.

We would therefore like to make the following recommendations to the OSCE and its member states:

RECOMMENDATIONS

General

- 1) **OSCE should consider organizing a specific annual session focusing on religious freedom and dialogue to strengthen existing ODIHR efforts in addressing this situation but more importantly to bring together representatives from religious groups, human rights defenders and NGO's focusing on religious freedom violations in order to**
 - raise concerns and share information on religious freedom violations
 - exchange best practices and devise an action plan and recommendations
 - discuss in-depth the issue in all its complexity

The session should particularly focus on drawing representatives from countries where there are concerns regarding religious freedom violations

- 2) OSCE should also consider reformulating the mandate of the Personal representative to focus on religious intolerance and discrimination with the implication that it will cover religious freedom violations against all religious groups without the need to specify each group.

Personal Representatives

- 3) **The Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions should visit all five Central Asian member states** in order to
- Investigate to what extent the legislation and practices compare with ODIHR/OSCE Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief.
 - Meet with religious leaders and human rights defenders and NGO's regarding the religious freedom situation
 - Make recommendations to the OSCE, its field missions and member states on ways in which to ensure that both the legislation and practice in Central Asian member states could be brought into compliance with international human rights standards on religious freedom.
- 4) **The Personal Representative concerned should also visit Turkey to investigate the situation of minority ethnic and religious groups.**
- 5) **The Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims should visit all five Central Asian member states** in order to
- investigate the situation regarding discrimination against Muslim religious groups

Further recommendations are available with the copies of the full speech.

May I also take the opportunity to sincerely thank the authorities in Cordoba and Seville and the Spanish government for hosting such an important event and for their excellent hospitality and arrangements.

Thank you Madame Chairperson

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Central Asia

The European Platform asks the OSCE and its member states to urge the Central Asian member states, in particular those of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan,

- 5) To ensure that their national legislation and practise complies with international guarantees and rights for freedom of religion and belief and prevention of discrimination on the basis of religion and belief.
- 6) To permit religious groups to conduct their activities without government interference or harassment.
- 7) Where applicable, to take immediate steps to reform restrictive registration laws governing practices of religious groups which prevent religious groups from practising their belief.
- 8) To investigate and, where necessary, bring to justice local government and security officials who violate the right to freedom of religion or belief.

The European Platform also asks the OSCE to consider ways in which to

- 9) Offer to assist the Central Asian national government authorities (particularly Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) in drafting appropriate legislation, which complies with international rights and guarantees of freedom of religion and belief.
- 10) Provide training to national government authorities and the security officials in international provisions for freedom of religion and belief.
- 11) Assist initiatives which promote better understanding of various religious groups and build relationships between moderate religious leaders from EU on one hand and Central Asian authorities and religious leaders on the other hand.

Cordoba Declaration

With regard to the Cordoba Declaration the European Platform recommends the following:

- 12) Article 1, the second part of the statement i.e. ensuring the freedom of the individual... should be a separate article as it concerns religious freedom obligations of the member states whereas the first part is concerned with relations between religious groups.
- 13) Article 7, first point concerning ODIHR activities, this should not be restricted to anti-Semitism alone but expanded to refer to all forms of religious intolerance.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are not necessarily supported by all the members of the Platform.

EU Platform on religious discrimination and intolerance initiative

Religious freedom does not feature very highly on the EU agenda. The purpose of the platform is identify those interested in the field and to discuss ways in which we could encourage deeper interest and commitment from EU institutions in religious intolerance and discrimination issues and where appropriate make policy recommendations to the European institutions. The European Platform is modeled to some extent on the Dutch Platform on International Religious freedom.

European Platform does not represent any particular religious group or denomination. The Platform will seek to ensure it has a balanced membership from religious groups and NGO's.

Founding members:

- Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)
- Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF – also representing IHF)
- Open Doors International (ODI)
- European Evangelical Alliance (EEA)

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