

HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING (HDIM) 2007

Specifically selected topic: Combating intolerance and discrimination and promoting mutual respect and understanding – implementation of commitments

(25 September 2007)

Remarks by Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims

Introduction:

Muslim communities especially in Western Europe and North America are experiencing an increasingly hostile environment towards them, coupled with discrimination and intolerance in various forms.

This phenomena, which is also referred to as Islamophobia is characterized by suspicion, prejudice, ignorance, negative or patronizing imaging; discrimination including in education, housing and employment; stereotyping all Muslims as “terrorist, violent or otherwise unfit”; lack of provision, recognition and respect for Muslims in public institutions; and attacks, abuse, harassment and violence against Muslims and persons perceived to be Muslim and against their property and prayer places.

Discrimination and intolerance against Muslims have devastating effects not only on the daily lives of the Muslim communities, but also on the societies where they live. In order to remedy this negative and disturbing phenomenon, sound strategies and educational approaches must be developed and vigorously implemented. Increasing understanding and respect for cultural and religious diversity would be the first step in identifying and developing criteria for good practices in combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

Remedies:

- a. It should be recognized that religious defamation and for that matter intolerance and discrimination against Muslims is an affront to human dignity.
- b. It should also be recognized that Islamophobia is exceptional among the

political ills of the present era: Frequently it is not only the Muslims who are attacked, but also their faith.

c. All concerned should refrain from making negative generalizations regarding Muslims and also should refrain from stigmatizing them.

d. Dual aspect of the rise of Islamophobia; on the one hand its intellectual legitimization and on the other hand tolerance shown to this legitimization, should be well recognized and countered.

e. Reality and seriousness of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims must be accepted. Otherwise this trend will result in the crystallization of cultural and religious differences.

f. Discrimination and intolerance against Muslims must be dealt with through a sound strategy on three levels:

- Personal and emotional
- Intellectual, ideological and media legitimization
- Political exploitation of Islamophobia

g. In order to effectively combat intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, condemnation must be accompanied by effective legislative and judicial measures as well as with education.

Promoting Tolerance:

Many European countries have simultaneously been facing the challenges of managing increasingly diverse and multi-cultural societies. The richness of diversity we observe encompasses religious, cultural, racial and linguistic aspects.

Often the debate around multi-culturalism is framed within the context of integration and has many connotations. It *can* hold the promise of creating mutual understanding between the diverse groups that characterize many European states today. However, the key word here is *mutual*.

Efforts to promote *mutual* and two-way understanding between groups will facilitate not only the promotion of tolerance, but more importantly mutual respect for differing viewpoints.

It is important to point out that ‘tolerance’, like ‘co-existence’ must be regarded as the lowest common denominator. What we must strive towards instead is the identification of our shared values and commonalities. We must strive towards creating strong and ‘*cohesive communities*’ where every individual has a sense of belonging to his/her community and State, as well as a stake in its well-being.

How may we create ‘cohesive communities?’ The first step is acknowledging and accepting that the face of our communities are changing. We must then strive to reflect this new diversity in our discourse – in our local grass-roots discourse, in our media discourse and of course in our political discourse at all levels.

In order to embrace diversity and multi-culturalism we must pro-actively engage the diverse voices that make up our new communities and formulate a new commonly forged identity. And this implies dialogue.

Inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue is absolutely critical as a strategy for embracing and enhancing mutual understanding. This dialogue must occur at *all levels* – at the level of nation states, at the regional level and at the community grass roots level. We must discuss our differences, but we must also renew our commitment to discovering our shared understandings and common experiences.

Political and community leaders from *all sides* must set a leading example in terms of responsible discourse and in setting up inter-group partnerships and opportunities for engagement. These leaders have the ability to influence public opinion and attitudes – which in turn has the ability to influence actions. Political leaders must serve as a positive example in terms of engaging and reflecting the diverse interests that characterize our societies.

We must also guard against threats to tolerance within our societies. Today’s challenge for multi-cultural societies is aptly illuminated by current tensions over some publications. These incidents underscore the need to create an environment in which peaceful means are sought in order to discuss our differences. While freedom of expression and freedom of speech are core values in democratic societies, we must be careful not to exploit them intentionally and deliberately provoke groups whose values we do not understand or share.

Likewise, it is also the role of all community and political leaders to find strategies for discussing and managing our differences. For example, while publication of offensive drawings is not defensible both from a legal and also from a moral point of view, violence also can not be justified as an adequate response. And herein the real threat to tolerance lies. The violent responses of fringe elements of Muslim communities must not be generalized as the response of the moderate Muslim majority who certainly take offence, but do not advocate violence as a means of settling disputes.

Similarly, extremists on the far-right must not be allowed to use these incidents as political capital for renewing the anti-immigration debate and inflaming tensions between communities.