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United States Mission to the OSCE

OSCE Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination Intervention for Session 4

Delivered by Professor Murray Friedman
Director of the Myer and Rosaline Feinstein Center for
American Jewish History

September 05, 2003

Mr. Chairman.

The response of the media in its various forms is one of the critical elements in publicizing and dealing with episodes of racism and intergroup conflict. Of course, the media have a responsibility to report such events as part of their regular duties. How it handles such reporting and commenting, however, can be a major force in exacerbating or calming an issue.

The highly competitive nature of the media, especially in democratic societies, creates a tendency to publicize unhappy events. Conflict makes news. Expressions of good will or efforts to seek intergroup harmony do not sell newspapers or cause people to tune into their television or radio. The result often can make the media part of the problem, rather than a solution, to it.

A recommendation the U.S. would like to make based on some experience with this type of issue is to seek an agreement with elements of the media to constitute a task force made up of them and them alone to create a voluntary code of behavior they might utilize to guide them in dealing with incidents. How should they respond in a manner that fulfills their responsibilities in unbiased reporting while avoiding making things worse. For example, one tactic they might agree to employ voluntarily is to avoid highlighting an incident by placing it on the back page, rather than making it front and center. In any case, the code of behavior will be of their choosing, not a result of coercive pressures by government or other outside forces. The idea seeks to put the manner of handling conflict in the hands of peers in a code drawn up by peers when the pressure is not on them and they can calmly think about the issues involved.

It has been our experience that even this benign manner of thinking through media behavior does not automatically win support. The idea of the media having total control in their responses has been ingrained for too long. Still, media officials are aware of community responsibilities and the appeal should be made. I think that support among the most enlightened elements of this important group can be found.