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United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Head of Office in Yerevan Ambassador Kapinos

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 5, 2008

Mr. Chairman.

We would like to welcome Ambassador Kapinos back to the Permanent Council, and thank him for his thorough and thoughtful report on the Office's activities in the past year. We remain impressed by the work the Office has done on policing and providing support for elections, including on the electoral code.

Such work has become increasingly important given the fragile state of democracy in Armenia following the February 19th election, as the final ODIHR report on those elections—released May 30th—has effectively documented. Armenia's new president and new administration have the chance for a fresh start to set matters straight, and they should seize the opportunity to set a new tone in the country.

We are concerned in that respect that thus far the new administration has done too little to correct the serious failings of the election and the post-election crisis. We believe that problems that are festering need to be resolved now, lest they boil over again.

Emphasis should be placed on restoring the democratic momentum that was lost during the election and its violent aftermath. In our view, the government should take urgent action to restore freedom of assembly and increase freedom of the media, in order to give the political opposition a legitimate space to operate. Ongoing trials against political opposition figures have resulted in the imposition of lengthy prison sentences based on dubious charges. We would welcome action by the Armenian authorities to end politically motivated prosecutions, and the defendants should be released. Additionally, it would be helpful if an independent, transparent and credible inquiry into the March 1-2 events would begin promptly.

Ambassador Kapinos, as you noted in your report, the Office in Yerevan can assist the authorities and Armenian society to overcome this internal polarization. We encourage the Office and the Government of Armenia to find ways to foster public discussion of current issues at the local level, including by publicizing national debates and discussions and reaching out to the opposition.

The United States remain ready to work together with the Office and the government and people of Armenia to put Armenia back on the path of democratic reform.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.