

Delegation of Belgium

**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR PIERRE-ETIENNE CHAMPENOIS
AT THE OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP CONFERENCE ON INTOLERANCE
AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS**

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Session 2

I should like to thank our Spanish hosts for this initiative, for their hospitality and for their organizational efforts. Permit me to make reference to the statement delivered by the Presidency of the European Union and to add the following comments reflecting the point of view of Belgium. I shall limit myself strictly to the points raised in the panel 2 discussions.

- Is there discrimination against Muslims? The answer is yes, and in some cases one can even speak of Islamophobia. This phenomenon poses a threat to the stability and cohesion of our societies.
- The main cause of the discrimination to which Muslims are subject is not essentially or mainly religious in origin. The causes are many and they have been very extensively described by the experts who have already spoken. These causes have a marked economic and social character. Ultimately, what is involved is a problem of integration in the broadest sense of that term. Discrimination is moreover directed not only against Muslims.
- Religion is one factor contributing to discrimination among others and not the main one. Only five per cent of the complaints received in Belgium by the Equal Opportunities Centre (CEC) refer to religion (this figure being true of all complaints and not only those received from Muslims).
- There can only be a long-term solution and one involving two levels.
 1. At the legislative level, it is the responsibility of the authorities, but not theirs alone. There is a need for greater protection under the law and for fundamental freedoms, especially freedom of expression and freedom of religion. There should be more freedom and not less. Limiting freedom of expression gives rise to social hatred and discrimination. What we need to combat discrimination is equality of opportunity — not only as a principle but also in everyday life.
 2. Tolerance is a state of mind, which cannot be reduced to a matter of law or statistics. One cannot impose it through law alone. It is a question of upbringing, education and culture.

Conclusion

The problem is real and the solution is not obvious. We need to draw our inspiration from the OSCE commitments recalled at the Ministerial Council meeting in Brussels in Decision No. 13/06.

As a specific measure, Belgium has established the Equal Opportunities Centre (an independent body but one that is financed by the State), which performs a monitoring and counselling function and provides a place to which any person who is the victim of discrimination can turn. The Centre provides information, awareness-raising programmes, training and co-operation and is also involved in the drafting of recommendations. In addition, the authorities have authorized the establishment of an executive board for Muslims in Belgium as an official independent body. As the representative of the Muslim community in Belgium in dealings with the national authorities and, more generally, with third parties, its task is to serve as an interlocutor for the purpose of helping to eliminate discrimination against members of the Muslim community.

Thank you.