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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement at the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Religion or Belief

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Session I: From Commitments to Implementation: Freedom of Religion or Belief in the OSCE Area

OSCE participating States have made a remarkably comprehensive and robust set of commitments to each other, affirming their intent to respect the freedom of conscience and belief and the right of individuals to freely profess and practice their faiths. Beginning with the Helsinki Final Act, and as elaborated further in more recent OSCE documents, we have committed ourselves unequivocally to ensuring freedom of conscience, religion or belief without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion. And in much of the OSCE region, religious practice flourishes, particularly where governments do not interfere in their peoples' rights to practice their own beliefs.

The United States nevertheless believes that the OSCE participating States still have important work to do to fulfill our commitments. The United States is particularly concerned about the discrimination many religious groups face, often labeled "dangerous sectarian or extremist" organizations. Anti-terrorism laws or extremism laws are too often misused – sometimes deliberately -- to limit religious groups. To cite two recent examples, new religion laws in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan appear to be aimed at keeping a lid on religious extremism. In practice, however, such restrictions on legitimate religious activities tend to enhance extremism. Among the groups labeled this way in some participating States are many Muslim groups, as well as groups such as Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientologists. These "extremist" labels often serve as a basis for the participating State to place limitations on the activities of these groups, to use courts to financially penalize them and, in some cases, to arrest members of the groups. We are disappointed to see that some participating States still discriminate against those who are members of certain religions who wish to seek public office.

President Obama's recent speech in Cairo included a clear statement of United States' policy on religious freedom. He noted the importance for countries to avoid impeding their citizens from practicing religion in almost any way they see fit -- for instance, by dictating what clothes a woman should wear. To elaborate on President Obama's words: even when such restrictions on religious expression are motivated by perceptions of the need for liberalism or modernism, they are inconsistent with our OSCE commitments, and therefore unacceptable.

Sometimes calls for religious tolerance or calls to respect others' beliefs are used to justify limitations on our OSCE commitments relating to freedom of expression and religion.

The United States believes that such limitations on freedom of expression, including religious expression, are unacceptable absent a clear threat of violence -- governments should permit free expression to the fullest extent possible. In our view, the antidote to intolerant speech is not limitations on speech – even when it is admittedly offensive --, but rather ensuring that our society uses its freedom of expression to discredit and condemn such statements, while nevertheless aspiring to a level of dialogue that is respectful and constructive.

The United States also remains concerned that some OSCE States impose burdensome registration requirements on religious communities as a pretext to deny their members the opportunity to practice their faiths. Police raids continue on groups who have come together to pray and read scripture, simply because the State has not permitted them to register. Participating States must respect the fundamental right of individuals to freedom of religion, irrespective of their registration status. The state has neither a role in preventing worship and other religious practice, nor a role in limiting the receipt of religious reading material, as is also done in some OSCE participating States.

Some participating States challenge the right of parents to provide a religious education for their children, and some States curtail this right for specific religious groups.

Several participating States which have recently re-written their laws on religion have done so in such a way that the laws are in violation of their OSCE commitments concerning religious freedom. Some governments have taken the correct step to invite the ODIHR Advisory Panel or the Council of Europe's Venice Commission to review draft legislation. Others, such as Armenia, refuse to commit to observe the experts' recommendations concerning restrictive draft legislation, while Azerbaijan has pushed a new law forward without the outside review that would ensure changes are in keeping with the country's commitments. Others, such as Kyrgyzstan, invited a technical review and even held roundtables with civil society, but then did not accept the OSCE's recommendations or take into account the concerns of nongovernmental organizations and minority religious leaders. We urge all participating States to take full advantage of the assistance that the OSCE offers. As President Obama said to the Turkish Grand National Assembly on April 6: "Freedom of religion and expression lead to a strong and vibrant civil society that only strengthens the state, which is why steps like reopening Halki Seminary will send such an important signal inside Turkey and beyond." Notwithstanding the 1989 commitment that participating States would "allow the training of religious personnel in appropriate institutions," two decades later, the Halki Seminary remains closed.

Our OSCE commitments are clear and the expert assistance is available. It is time now to let our citizens practice their religion without government intervention.

Thank you.