



United States Mission to the OSCE

Opening Plenary Statement

As delivered by Ambassador Steven Pifer
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, October 2, 2006

Mr. Chairman,

At the 1990 Paris Summit, then-President George H.W. Bush spoke of the rediscovery of freedom in a Europe in which the seeds of democracy and human rights had found new soil. The last sixteen years bear witness to the remarkable developments that those seeds have produced. Our task is to further nourish the seeds, to further broaden democratic practices and expand human rights protections in the OSCE region.

The United States continues to attach great importance to the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. It is an essential tool for monitoring progress and shortcomings in meeting the commitments that all governments here today have undertaken by virtue of their being OSCE signatories.

We have seen progress since our last meeting. In March, Ukraine held free, fair and competitive elections. The newest OSCE participating State, Montenegro, conducted an independence referendum in May and elections in September that were judged generally in accordance with international standards. Nevertheless, serious problems remain, and we here at this meeting must address them candidly and honestly.

Notwithstanding their signatures on the Helsinki Final Act, Presidents Niyazov and Karimov preside over repressive regimes that actively thwart democratic development and routinely disregard the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the people of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In both, the powers of the state are often employed to thwart dissent and opposition, a practice that unfortunately is equally true in Belarus under President Lukashenko. Kazakhstan under President Nazarbayev, another signatory, also has a disappointing implementation record.

An object of particular scorn for such rulers is civil society, fellow citizens committed to peaceful democratic change and the defense of human rights. Each day brings news of the latest closure of a non-governmental organization in Uzbekistan. In Turkmenistan there are no democracy and human rights NGOs, while the few remaining in Belarus are plagued with persistent official harassment. Also of concern is the adoption of new restrictive laws, such as Russia's amendments to the Law on Public Associations, as well as Kazakhstan's efforts to make NGOs financially dependent on the state.

An emerging throwback to a bygone era is the retort "interference in internal affairs." The 1991 Moscow Meeting definitively dealt with that issue. Let me quote: "the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension...are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned."

We must never lose sight of our responsibility to uphold the dignity of the individual and present the human face of the victim. Emblematic of those targeted for abuse, we need only consider courageous individuals such as Kakabai Tedjenov in Turkmenistan, Mutabar Tojibaeva or Bakhtiyar Khamroev in Uzbekistan, or Alexander Kozulin in Belarus. The United States is deeply concerned by the death of journalist Ogalsapar Muradova while in custody in prison in Turkmenistan.

We must also recall that, seventeen months after the tragedy at Andijon, the Government of Uzbekistan has yet to allow a credible independent investigation into the events that led to the deaths of hundreds, including women and children.

The tragic conflict in Russia's North Caucasus continues to be associated with a variety of human rights abuses such as torture, disappearance, and extrajudicial killing, yet there has been little meaningful accountability. Individuals who appealed to the European Court of Human Rights have been subject to harassment and, in some cases, abduction, apparently to convince them to drop their cases.

This year is noteworthy in that it marks the fifteenth anniversary of the creation of the Office for Free Elections, the precursor of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. We are concerned by attempts to sow seeds of doubt with respect to ODIHR's activities, particularly with respect to elections monitoring. Ambassador Strohal, let me express my government's appreciation to you and your team of professionals for your contributions. The United States hopes these contributions will be enhanced even further by devoting more attention to implementation of ODIHR election recommendations and by ODIHR working with participating States to examine the election climate in advance of upcoming ballots.

We are also mindful that states have a broader role to play in combating human trafficking – a modern form of slavery. An area of growing trafficking concern involves the sexual exploitation of children. The United States is working with Belgium and France to introduce an initiative for the Brussels Ministerial to combat this abuse.

The dignity of others is violated through anti-Semitism, which remains a significant problem, and other forms of intolerance and racism. Related to this, the United States supports continuation of the positions of the Chair's three Personal Representatives on Tolerance by the Spanish Chair. We also welcome Romania's offer to host a conference on tolerance next year based on the Cordoba format, with a particular emphasis on anti-Semitism.

Mr. Chairman, President Bush has repeatedly stressed the importance that the United States attaches to the expansion of democracy and freedom. Democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law are important not only in and of themselves, but in the contribution they make to a more stable, peaceful and prosperous world community. My delegation looks forward to a frank discussion during the coming days, motivated by our shared responsibility to uphold the dignity of the individual and bring into focus the truly human dimension of our work, as we seek to match deeds to the lofty commitments we have made as OSCE signatories.