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ENGLISH only

## **Cordoba Conference on Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims**

### **Intervention by Ireland Session 1**

Mr Chairman,

Ireland firmly supports the proposition that action against intolerance and discrimination must take a holistic form. There can be no hierarchy of discrimination, disadvantage or suffering between categories of victims. Comparisons between degrees of grievance detract from the essence of the struggle and obscure important issues of principle. It seems particularly appropriate that we should meet in Cordoba, a city whose history and architecture embody much of the Muslim-Christian encounter over the centuries.

Focused consideration of areas where intolerance is a particular problem, or where it takes particular forms, can be valuable provided it does not detract from the overall approach. Ireland is acutely conscious of the difficulties which are faced by Islamic communities throughout the OSCE area and in some of our partner States. We are also conscious that this intolerance can take different forms, or be based on different prejudices from those which motivate other forms of intolerance and discrimination.

Ireland itself is home to a relatively small, but growing, Islamic community of between thirty and forty thousand people. Unlike many other European States this community does not trace its antecedents to one region of the world, but encompasses Muslims with roots in North Africa, Turkey, the Middle East, the sub-Continent, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and sub Saharan Africa as well as some Irish converts. In one sense this has made the development of a coherent Muslim community more challenging, but in others it has broadened the perception of Muslims in wider Irish society and allowed Irish people to gain a better sense of the ethnic and cultural diversity contained within the broad fold of Islam.

Ireland has no established church or official religion. However, there is almost universal recognition of the important role played by churches, faith communities and non-confessional bodies, even as formal participation in many religious organisations is in decline. It was with this in mind that our Prime Minister launched an initiative, in February of this year, to hold structured dialogue between the Government and churches and faith communities. In his speech on that occasion Prime Minister Ahern recalled that while Ireland has traditionally been a Christian country it “has in the past decade welcomed, what in an historical context, are relatively large numbers of non-Christians.” In the same speech he pointed out that “This multicultural reality requires

a new and sympathetic response from the civil authorities, while continuing to respect the position of the larger and more established denominations and faith communities.” We expect that Ireland’s Muslims will play an active and constructive role in that dialogue and thereby contribute to the development of policy. As comparative newcomers to Ireland our Muslim community is faced with the challenge of adjusting to life in a country with a distinct identity. We hope that the dialogue between Government and Churches and Faith Communities will be helpful to them in meeting that challenge.

Of course the problems which may be felt by Muslims in Ireland are often not solely related to their religion and, like other groups in Irish society, Muslims benefit from our comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation. The Islamic community also benefits from the substantial support provided by the State to schools managed by religious denominations. Funding is given to schools managed by Islamic bodies in the same way as to those schools managed by Christian churches or the Jewish community.

While the position of the Islamic community in Ireland bears favourable international comparison, we are conscious that maintaining a tolerant and inclusive society requires constant effort. This is reflected in the Programme for Government agreed by the three political parties which formed our new coalition Government in July of this year. The Government is committed, *inter alia*, to:

- Develop a national integration policy, based on equality principles and taking a revised and broader view of social inclusion which builds on the experience of other countries.
- Continue to promote national campaigns aimed at challenging racism and promoting understanding of diversity and fund campaigns that educate the Irish public about the role of immigration in Irish society.
- Support the services offered by ethnic-led non-governmental organisations working with the immigrant community, in particular those that provide for the educational, cultural and linguistic needs of migrant workers.

Mr. Chairman,

I would not presume that our experience is applicable in all participating and partner States, but we would recommend that: the phenomenon of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims must be addressed in the context of a holistic approach to the overall issue; where channels for dialogue between the government and civil society exist Muslim groups must be included and if necessary encouraged to participate and; where State support or assistance is made available to church and faith community based social or civil society groups this support must be extended on an equal basis to Muslim groups.

Thank you.