

## INTER-CULTURAL DIALOGUE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

*(Panel organized by the President of the UN Human Rights Council, Geneva, 18 March 2008)*

### **Remarks by Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims**

Our panel is tasked to contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which the universal character of human rights is perceived in various cultural environments.

Let me begin with a few remarks on human rights, which is a concept that is not easy to define. Moreover it has often been used rather loosely. Therefore, instead of trying to define human rights in an arbitrary fashion, it might be better to stress the underlying characteristics of human rights: Human rights are fundamental, universal and indivisible; they derive from the dignity and worth inherent in the human person. They are innate and comprise the whole life span; they are absolute; they can not be given up or abandoned; and they are individual.

I believe two main needs related to protection and promotion of human rights must be underlined:

- a) Firstly, a philosophical conceptualization of human rights is needed; that is to say we have to deal with human rights on an intellectual foundation.
- b) Secondly, we have to bring to the fore the ethical dimension of human rights and to combine this approach with human rights education.

I repeatedly tried to highlight these points during my activities as the Personal Representative of the OSCE CiO on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims.

As I see it, one of the highest achievements of mankind during the last fifty years has been recognition and acceptance of the necessity to protect and promote human rights. In that domain, we also have to evaluate the results of our collective endeavours.

Human rights are cherished universal values. Like threats to all cherished things, there are threats to human rights also, poverty and ignorance being the two main ones. Here again international cooperation comes to the foreground.

Not only human rights, but democratic pluralism, rule of law, transparency and accountability are also universal values. Although these values are essentially universal, they are not applied universally. Therefore, one of our priority tasks should be to identify the roots of these values within our respective cultures and to promote their collective ownership.

I would now like to address the concept of dialogue, which is a most frequently used one, but sometimes in an empty manner. The first condition for a successful dialogue is that we should be talking to each other, but not across each other. Inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, on the other hand, has often been defined as an open and respectful exchange of

views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures and/or religions that would lead to a deeper understanding of the other's perceptions. I for one believe that the objective should not be confined only to achieving a "deeper understanding", but the aim should be broader to include conflict prevention and de-escalation, combating prejudices and stereotypes in public and political discourse and facilitating coalition-building across diverse cultural and religious communities.

In this respect, what I would like to highlight first is the importance of promoting and facilitating inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and partnerships aimed at tolerance, mutual respect and understanding and freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief at both the national and the international levels. I would also like to recall decisions of various international organizations, including the OSCE, whereby member countries decided, in implementing their commitments to promote tolerance and non-discrimination, to focus their activities on legislation, law enforcement, education, media, data collection, migration and integration, religious freedom, inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue. On the other hand, through implementation-focused thematic meetings they aimed to underline the importance of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic institutions in creating a context for inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding. They also focused on the role of governments and civil society in promoting understanding with a view to ensuring inclusiveness, respect for diversity and freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

At this stage, a brief word on what needs to be done might be appropriate:

- We must identify ways to use inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue and civil society partnerships as a means to promote conflict prevention and de-escalation;
- We must also explore inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic partnership and dialogue as a means to combat prejudice and stereotypes in public and political discourse;
- We must attempt to facilitate coalition-building across diverse cultural and religious communities and civil society groups;
- Finally, we should identify the role of various actors in promoting inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding.

Let me now move to diversity and tolerance. Many countries nowadays are facing the challenges of managing increasingly diverse and multi-cultural societies. The richness of such diversity encompass religious, racial and cultural aspects, which sometimes lead to social conflicts and even social violence.

On the other hand, what we observe in the international scene is increasing polarization, especially along cultural and religious lines.

These two trends, as I see it, must be addressed in conjunction with each other.

Mutual respect to, and not only respect but also sensitivity and knowledge of other cultures and religions both at the home front and at the inter-state relations is a must. Cultural

and convictional differences is a reality. This reality should not be designed in a divisive manner, but rather in an over-embracing fashion. In other words, isolation is no option.

However, the need for respect for diversity should not be used as an excuse for human rights violations or as an excuse for implementing human rights partially.

Tolerance, on the other hand, has been defined as the capacity for or as the practice of recognizing and respecting the practices and beliefs of others. In other words, tolerance is acceptance of differing views and fairness towards people who hold these differing views. Needless to say, acceptance of differing views does not necessarily entail identifying one's self with such views, but entails merely respecting them. In that regard, I would like to suggest that we should have a new look at the UNESCO definition of what tolerance means and what it does not mean.

In order to promote tolerance, I believe an ethical and intellectual approach must be adopted. For that, a mutual and two-way understanding should be the starting point. (Here the key word is "mutual".) But understanding is not enough, there must also be knowledge.

What we should be seeking is not a call by a benevolent dictator or ruler to its subjects. What we have in front of us is two or more sides. In a contemporary and democratic society we can not speak about concessions or favours by the majority to the minority (or to the minorities/vulnerable groups).

What we should instead be seeking is respect and equal treatment and equal opportunities. In other words, new avenues must be found.

If we want to reach a consensus, on the other hand, some conditions must be met: Transparency and inclusivity comes as the first two "must"s. Additionally, our relationship(s) should be based on trust and equality of the members of the society should be respected. To put it differently, a comprehensive strategy of interaction must be adopted.