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PERMANENT MISSION
OF THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA
TO THE INTERNATIONAL
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**OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting
(Almaty, 12-13 June 2006)
SESSION I**

**Statement by Ms. Albana Dautllari
Delegation of Albania**

Mr. Chairman,

I am particularly pleased to be representing Albania at this interesting and important meeting on highly sensitive topics that we have gathered to discuss.

Let me first congratulate the organizers of the meeting, the Government of Kazakhstan, for hosting it and creating all the necessary facilities for a pleasant stay and successful deliberations of the meeting. May I at this juncture remind the participants and the Belgian Chairmanship that, in one of the two meetings on tolerance organized in Vienna by the Chairmanship after the cartoon crisis, the Albanian Ambassador to the OSCE has formally offered the readiness of Albania to host the follow-up to this meeting on the topic of inter-ethnic, inter-religious and intercultural tolerance, in Tirana, in the year 2007. We are formally repeating the same offer in this meeting.

Mr. Chairman, let me now share with you some experiences of the Albanian people and nation with regard to tolerance, be it religious, linguistic or ethnic. A few examples, simple as they may be, may indeed tell much more than a host of nice statements or lectures on how it should or ought to be done! During the years of the Balkan Wars, before that, as well as during the First World War, a number of foreign armies crossed Albanian lands, almost as in the entire Balkans: Austrian, French, Italian, Greek, Serbian, Montenegrin, Bulgarian and Turkish armies. When the war ended and these armies, scattered as they were had nothing to eat, no medicines to treat the wounds, and means to return to their homelands, the Albanian people provided shelter for their soldiers although it knew pretty well that many had committed crimes and atrocities against the Albanians themselves. During the Second World War, the capitulation of Mussolini's Italy left behind on Albanian soil more than twenty thousand militia and army officers of its occupying army. Within two weeks, these forces were disarmed and were treated as a deserting army, predestined to be annihilated by the German Nazi army that set in. The Albanian people

saved those soldiers from a horrible end, although they had killed, burned, ravaged and robbed. The Italian soldiers were camouflaged in traditional Albanian costumes and sheltered in the families of the Albanians.

The treatment of the Jews by the Albanian people during the Second World War was indeed unprecedented. The Albanian governments of the time collaborated with the Fascist and Nazi authorities, as in many other places. They collaborated as vassal governments. However, it is significant to note that they never handed over to the foreign armies any lists of Jews. Albania is the only country in the world where, although it went through a double occupation, not a single Jew was handed over to the Nazis and no Jew was taken from Albania and ended up in concentration camps. Not even one single Jew was ever victimized in Albania. This goes not only for the Jews of Albania proper, who were its citizens, but also for about three thousand Jews who came over from other Balkan states, escaping the threat of annihilation where they were living. These three thousand Jews, the majority of who entered Albania illegally, found immediate and unconditioned protection both from the Albanian people and authorities.

Does it speak of tolerance? We think very much so! Tolerance consists in an ethno-typical character of the Albanians. This is not to say or to imply that other peoples have no tolerance, not at all. This is to say that perhaps this feature may be connected also with the geo-political position of the Albania. At the crossroad of two worlds, Christianity and Islam, the Albanians have taken and given with both of them by also preserving its identifying core, by serving as a bridge where influences had to cross and also by absorbing from them. It is probably this interesting meeting point and eventually mixture of cultures, traditions, religions and values that has helped form among the Albanians the historical conviction that DISTINCTION - be it religious, regional, racist, genetic, national, cultural, etc., cannot be and is not a threat, rather it is an asset! Such a conviction has been at the formative foundation of that great spirit of inter-religious and inter-cultural tolerance, generosity and hospitality that has been so distinctly pronounced throughout its ancient history among the Albanians.

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The co-existence of these religions on the Albanian soil is an unusual though extremely interesting phenomenon in a region where a religion has often been connected closely to a national identity that was taken to extremes – to nationalism and chauvinism, which in turn then led to terrible fratricidal wars that ravaged the region. Let me briefly refer to the process of founding and later of the disintegration of three federative Yugoslavias, or the southern slav states under various names. These have been three unsuccessful experiments. Part of the Albanian nation and people had been decided to be incorporated under these experimental formations something like 130 years ago. So being the case, they and the Albanians of Albania have never been the aggressors in any of the wars that have taken place in the Balkans, they have never attacked anyone. Indeed the Albanians have been victims of the others' aggressions. Today we are the sole country in Europe and probably elsewhere which borders on the greater part of its borders with Albanian population. Our presence and fortitude

has only been used to found a civil co-existence with other ethnicities, peoples and religions; Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro are only vivid examples.

In contrast with this experience, little known or ignored, the conflicts based on religion or entwined with and using religious elements for political and nationalistic goals, have dominated the political developments of the last decade in our region. During the disintegration process of former Yugoslavia, the very same faiths and beliefs found themselves in the extreme positions of armed adversaries with enormous human, moral and material consequences already known worldwide and where in fact, as the Bosnia case has shown, the religious tolerance that did not lack before was shattered by the intolerance of gigantic proportions. This was a clear demonstration of how dangerous it can be when religion is used as a cover to achieve nationalistic political objectives.

The same scenario was prepared for Kosova, too. The propaganda of Milošević tried to present the peaceful Albanian resistance as a war of the Albanian Muslims against the Serb Christianity. The entire world witnessed the expulsion of a million of innocent citizens whose only guilt was opposing the criminal regime of Milošević and their aspiration to live free. All the Albanian citizens and religious beliefs in Kosova, Catholics and Muslims became victims of Serbian terror. They offered another example that the Serbian violence was not directed against a religious belief, but against an entire people of a different nationality in the name of religion. The war of Kosova put an end to the Balkan wars of 1990s which took the lives of more than one million innocent citizens.

The Albanians and the Serbs in Kosova, together with the other ethnicities, are working for six years now towards building a democratic, multi-ethnic and European society. There have been obstacles, difficulties and problems, some of which incited by those that may be interested to have lack of stability and co-existence in Kosova. But time is proving that the interest on the final status and European future of Kosova has to do with every citizen of Kosova, regardless of the religious belief and nationality. In Prishtina, lately, the politicians and citizens of all religions participated in the beginning of the construction of the Great Catholic Cathedral. They undertook this act in a sign of appreciation for their ancient Christian history and also in an effort to demonstrate their full willingness for a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Kosova.

The Albanian model of religious harmony based on democratic values and the rule of law takes on a great value in the global debate over the need of understanding, respect and co-existence among different cultures and civilizations. In contrary to the pessimistic scenarios and forecasts, the values of freedom and democracy properly implemented in full respect for diversity, are successfully becoming more and more dominating in approaching and strengthening the ties among cultures, peoples, religions and civilizations.

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Through its distinctive history and contribution Albania represents one of the unique cases of a country with different religious beliefs, where all the political factors of the society, including the religious communities, are strong

supporters of the country's integration in the European Union and NATO. The Euro-Atlantic spirit and objective is one across the board. We are conscious that values are not eternal, nor identical. But they ought to be preserved and cultivated in the mentality of the citizens together with a democratic culture and continuous improvement of the legal framework. We strive to transform a culture of dialogue among different religious and communities into a bridge of unity and communication, exchanges and stronger connection among peoples and countries. The strengthening of democratic values and spirit and respect for one another can bring about the required results for tolerance, peaceful co-existence, full cooperation, trust, isolation of extremists, and ultimately a successful meeting of the challenges of the time.

Thank you