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**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

Mr. Chairman

Since the Helsinki Final Act, freedom of religion and belief has been one of the key commitments OSCE participating states have agreed to adhere to. Let me underline that Serbia as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country does – in compliance with these commitments – its utmost to promote freedom of religion and belief as well as tolerance and nondiscrimination in this respect. Hence we support the activities of the OSCE in this regard as well as the Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion.

Mr. Chairman

Allow me to use this opportunity to inform the distinguished audience about recent developments, challenges and positive examples in the protection and promotion of freedom of religion in the Republic of Serbia, in particular with respect to the activities and programmes of our Ministry for Religions.

As I said, Mr. Chairman, Serbia is a multiethnic and multi-confessional country with 27 officially recognized ethnic communities, belonging to almost all major confessions. Today in Serbia there are 8 so-called traditional, as well as, around 40 other registered religious communities, including also those who present new religious movements or alternative forms of religion. Let me underline that according to the relevant Serbian Law there is no obligation for religious communities to register. However, the number of already registered communities shows that they welcome and seek cooperation with the state authorities.

In 2006, after very broad political consultations, a new Law on religious communities and churches was adopted by Serbian parliament. The Law establishes the equality of all

churches and religious communities, provides the possibility for all of them to cooperate with the state and guarantees their full internal autonomy. On the basis of this Law the Government of the Republic of Serbia developed a strategy of cooperation with the religious organizations in the implementation of programs in the areas of:

- religious education
- the improvement of the financial sustainability of religious communities
- the protection of religious, cultural and national identities
- the promotion of religious culture, freedoms and tolerance
- and supporting the building and reconstruction of places of worship.

The Ministry for Religions closely follows the implementation of the Law and conducts assessments of all existing problems, trying to find solution for encountered difficulties. Thanks to all these efforts, today, in Serbia, we have stable inter-confessional relations, and the number of incidents related mainly to the attacks on objects of the smaller religious communities, has decreased to a great extent.

One of the most common difficulty for some individuals and religious communities in Serbia the Ministry identified is still their registration, even if the procedure is very simple and fully in accordance with European standards. The problem is that the majority of religious communities has a very weak organizational capacity and some of them also do not have appropriate archives. This is the reason why the Ministry chose a flexible approach and receives all applications that fulfill a minimum of criteria.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me also use this opportunity to draw the attention of the distinguished audience to the fact that in spite of all the efforts our authorities are undertaking, not all is well in Serbia with regard to the implementation of religious freedoms. I speak about our southern province of Kosovo and Metohija. Since a decade now Serbian churches and monasteries in Kosovo have been the subject of an orchestrated campaign of cultural cleansing that continues until the present day. Around 150 Serb Orthodox shrines, churches, monasteries and cemeteries have completely been razed to the ground, damaged or desecrated.

But since we do not want to take more of your time during this session, we will speak on this issue in a more substantive way tomorrow.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman