

Statement by the Delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan**Working Session 2.****24 September 2013****Tolerance and non-discrimination II: Review of the implementation of commitments on promotion of mutual respect and understanding:**

- Prevention and responses to hate crimes in the OSCE area,
- Combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, also focusing on intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions,
- Combating anti-Semitism,
- Combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

The Republic of Azerbaijan is a multinational and multi-religious country. The national policy of the country is defined and carried out on the principles of tolerance and coexistence of various nationalities, ethnic groups and religious minorities.

Regardless, the fact that the majority of Azerbaijani population are Muslims, there is no discrimination as to religion or belief. Nowadays more than one thousand mosques, eleven churches, six synagogues and other religious temples are functioning in Azerbaijan without any obstacles.

Despite the difficulties being experienced by Azerbaijan, due to the unresolved armed conflict that continues for about 20 years with neighboring Armenia, which occupies 20 percent of the Azerbaijani territory and the presence of about one million refugees and forcibly displaced persons, the Government of Azerbaijan continues to pursue a consistent policy towards protection of the rights of all minorities living in the country.

In accordance with the National Action Plan for Human Rights for 2011-2015 signed by the President of Azerbaijan special measures are taken for the strengthening of intercultural dialogue and interfaith cooperation, protection and further development of cultural heritage of ethnic and religious minorities in different regions of Azerbaijan. At the same time, protection and development of minorities' cultural heritage was identified as one of the directions in the above mentioned Action plan.

Every year different religious temples are restored or built in different regions of Azerbaijan. For example, just recently, this month President of the Republic of Azerbaijan participated at the opening ceremony of the German Lutheran Church after the capital restoration which was carried out with the initiative of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Shamkir region of Azerbaijan.

At the same time, Azerbaijan attaches great attention to awareness raising activities among population. Every year, including during the period after the latest Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) the State Committee on Work with Religious Organizations held seminar-trainings on cultural and religious diversity, including inter-religious dialogue in various regions of the country.

Respectfully, Azerbaijan attaches particular importance to human rights education, the Ministry of Education regularly organizes events oriented to strengthening respect to people representing different cultures, ethnicities and religions. Trainings have been conducted for teaching staff on “National minorities”, “Respect to people representing different cultures, races, nationalities, languages and religions” and others.

Moreover Azerbaijan pays great attention to promotion of best examples of religious tolerance and inter-religious dialogue. As a member of the Group of Friends of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, Azerbaijan feels responsible for the promotion of inter-religious and intercultural dialogue based on mutual respect and understanding. As a country located at the crossroads of the West and East, North and South and benefiting of being part of both the Islamic world and Europe, Azerbaijan has always been a place of peaceful and prosperous coexistence and tolerance between different faiths, ethnic groups and philosophies. In this regard, Azerbaijan initiated "Baku Process" of cross cultural dialogue, launched in 2008. The special feature of this process is that it brings together people of different origins from different cultures through programs and projects in the field of culture and dialogue. We believe the more we learn cultural, religious and social similarities and differences between us, the more we understand each other. In this regard, various important events took place within the framework of this process after the latest HDIM. Within this project, every two years Baku hosts World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, attended by participants from all over the world. The latest event took place in May 2013. Moreover, the National Tolerance Center was launched within the Forum. Different projects for promoting inter-religious tolerance are planned to be hold within the abovementioned Center.

Besides, Azerbaijan initiated International Humanitarian Forum and one of the sessions of the latest Forum which was held in October 2012 was dedicated to multiculturalism. During this session practice of Azerbaijan was largely discussed as a model of ethnic-cultural tolerance.

Thank you.

BPE Pax Europa - AUSTRIA

Freedom of Religion and belief

BPE Austria values the freedom of religion as an inalienable human right. But freedom of religion also means the right to leave a religion or to have no religion at all.

In some countries, apostasy from Islam means the death penalty. Unfortunately, even in the OSCE participating states apostates are threatened by their families or the community if they want to leave Islam.

An immigrant from Pakistan, now an Austrian citizen, Sabatina James, has to live in a hiding place somewhere in Germany, protected by the police, because she converted to Christianity. In order to stop her, her family had lured her to Pakistan, locked her in a madrassa and forced her to marry her cousin. Fortunately she was able to escape.

Sharia law stipulates the killing of apostates according to the Reliance of the Traveller, which is the canonical law. I quote: "*When a person who has reached puberty and is sane voluntarily apostatizes from Islam, he deserves to be killed.*"

As the Dutch politician puts it, *Any religion that invites you in but then will not let you out is no longer a religion.*

BPE Austria therefore recommends that measurements be taken by law enforcement and authorities to **protect** Apostates from Islam in the OSCE region and to consequently **punish** the perpetrators even if it means deportation.