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**Address by Mr. Brian Cowen, T.D.,
Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ireland,
to the OSCE Conference on anti-Semitism,
Berlin, 28 April 2004**

Introductory Remarks

I am honoured to address the OSCE Conference on anti-Semitism on behalf of the European Union. We are grateful for the leadership shown by the Bulgarian Chairmanship in Office in preparing this Conference. We warmly salute the German government for inviting us to gather here in the great European city of Berlin at this important time for the European Union and the OSCE.

I know that this Conference is a key element in the ongoing programme of work of the OSCE to address the challenges we face to combat racism, xenophobia and intolerance in the OSCE area. The European Union strongly supports the OSCE work on these fundamental and urgent human rights issues. We certainly hope that this anti-Semitism Conference and the other related intolerance events this year yield positive, lasting results for our communities.

The European Union agrees that the OSCE's approach to anti-Semitism should be action-oriented. We welcome the focus of this Conference on practical measures including measures of prevention, education and protection which should be implemented with resolve in all OSCE participating States.

EU position

Ireland and our European Partners oppose anti-Semitism, totally and absolutely. Anti-Semitism is wrong. Racism is wrong. Intolerance is wrong. Discrimination is wrong. Just as sectarian and ethnic violence are wrong. They are all dangerous cancers which have the power to undermine society and engulf our values. They are breeding grounds for conflict and instability. They have no place in Europe at the dawn of the 21st century. They certainly have no place whatsoever in the European Union which is founded on the ideals of the equality and the dignity of every member of our human family.

This Conference is an important occasion to reaffirm our basic values and to renew the EU's public condemnation of the evil of anti-Semitism in all its manifestations.

Remembering the Holocaust: Taking the Lesson of the past into the Future

As we look ahead to 1 May we foresee the opening of a bright new chapter in the history of Europe which has been besmirched with the terrible legacy of past discrimination against Jews. It is less than seven decades since World War II with its carnage and concentration camps. The systematic attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe in the Holocaust demonstrated the appalling consequences of a system constructed on racial supremacy. The shadow of ethnic, religious and racial hatred fell across Europe.

The European ideal was driven by a determination to ensure that the Europe which came out from under the cloud of the Holocaust would be a different place and would never go back to the inhumanity, intolerance, and division of the war years. In that sense, the cause of tolerance is inseparable from the cause of the European Union itself. All of Europe knows that a society without the voice of tolerance and the vision of equality is not merely less tolerant and less equal. It is less human.

In this sense, the future of Europe rests both on an openness to remembering the lessons of history and a deep resolve to pass on the values of tolerance, equality and human dignity to the next generation.

We do this through our democratic institutions, our commitment to the rule of law, to human rights and free speech, and through our support for the work of the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and above all through our unwavering commitment to the United Nations system.

We know that we also have to reach into the hearts and minds of the millions of young people who fill our classrooms and lecture theatres in the schools and universities of Europe today. For these young people, the 1930s and 1940s may be the distant past. But as heirs to the European ideal, it falls to us to ensure that the values we pass to our young people guide them well as they enthusiastically face into the challenges of building a new European Union in the modern age. Therefore, we wholeheartedly agree with the emphasis on the vital role of education and public awareness in the drive against anti-Semitism in the decision of this Conference.

Recent trends and resolution on anti-Semitism

Madam Chair,

Over the last ten years, we know that anti-Semitism and racial tensions have increased in Europe, just as Europe itself has become a more multicultural society. EU leaders share the concern in Israel and in the international Jewish community about a renewed increase in anti-Semitism in Europe and elsewhere. We unreservedly condemn recent anti-Semitic acts which have seen synagogues and Jewish cemeteries defaced and Jews physically attacked on the streets. Indeed, it was due to our deep concern at recent incidents that Ireland last year proposed a stand-alone resolution on anti-Semitism at the UN General Assembly which was backed by all 15 EU Member States, with the support of all 10 acceding states. The intention was to introduce a Resolution around which everyone could unite and we were disappointed that it did not prove possible to have the Resolution adopted.

This OSCE Conference is therefore a key, and welcome, opportunity to further highlight the determination of European governments to root out the vile phenomenon of anti-Semitism. We support the OSCE call to promote respect and tolerance for Judaism and all faiths, and to ensure respect for all holy places where people gather for prayerful worship.

I would hope also that by saying “No” to anti-Semitism through this Conference and its follow up, we are also explicitly saying “Yes” to an honest discussion about the profoundly important human rights issue of freedom of belief.

Supporters of the struggle against anti-Semitism rightly call for action. They are right to ask the tough questions. They are right to call for more to be done using the strengths and resources of our Governments to address the human rights challenges Jews face in Europe today. Others make equally compelling calls and will be heard too.

Anti-Semitism must be addressed by firm measures. But while we do so, we cannot and should not expect reasonable criticism and fair comment about specific Israeli government policies to fall silent. Criticism of government policies is an essential feature of democratic political systems. The exploitation of race for political purposes by any government or any politician – be it is an offensive weapon or as a shield to fend off criticism – is quite simply unacceptable.

Legal protection and public awareness are key elements of the EU's drive to deal with the disturbing issue of anti-Semitism. As Governments, we have a duty to ensure that our political and legal systems provide effective guarantees of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief and the right to freedom from discrimination based on race or religion, including providing effective remedies in cases where such rights are violated.

The European Court of Human Rights has a unique role in human rights protection on these issues. Furthermore, the Charter on Fundamental Rights, which we have incorporated into the new draft constitution, prohibits discrimination in the strongest possible terms.

The European Union has developed over the past number of years a far-reaching, concrete approach to tackling intolerance, including anti-Semitism. This approach is centred on new legislative measures, such as the passing of strict laws by Member States against the production, sale, and dissemination of anti-Semitic propaganda. We have also set up mechanisms at European level so that we “mainstream” anti-intolerance practices across our full range of policy activities while we reinforce cooperation among the Union's Member States.

The approach covers action in the fields of justice and home affairs, employment and social affairs, education and external relations. It will succeed as a key part of our work to fashion a Union which respects and protects diversity.

Madam Chair,

I know that details of all the EU actions in this area will be discussed in the workshops over the next days so I will not discuss them in depth here. But suffice it to say that key to the EU's approach are the Directives on Racial and Employment Equality. In 2000, the Council of the European Union decided that all Member States should by the end of 2003 incorporate into their national legislation two key anti-discrimination measures. These Directives bring added protection against discrimination – direct or indirect - on racial, ethnic, religious and other grounds. Taken together, these apply broadly to employment, education and access to social services.

Another important aspect of our fight against Anti-Semitism is our co-operation with other organisations. Last December, the OSCE Ministerial Council tasked the ODIHR, in full cooperation with the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia to serve as a collection point for information and statistics collected by participating states. The European Union is convinced that in order to effectively combat intolerance in a coherent and consistent way, we must make thorough use of the experiences of and synergies between these bodies, and we look forward to assisting ODIHR in the furtherance of its tasks in this regard.

Conclusion

The EU will continue to fight anti-Semitism because it is wrong and it is dangerous. Member States are key to the drive to combat discrimination, to deal with the problems of incitement to hatred, and to ensure that people who promote anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic propaganda have no place to hide in the Union.

We will do so because in defending the freedom of belief, equality and dignity of Jewish citizens we are defending the human rights and core values of each and every one of our citizens. The people of each of our nations – be they Jew, Christian, Moslem, Hindu or non-believer - share a common desire to live in security and dignity as equal members of the human family.

1 May 2004 is three days away. It will be recorded as one of the greatest days for freedom in the history of Europe. It will see the EU strengthened, enriched and emboldened by the membership and experience of ten new member states. The journey to EU enlargement has been guided by the promise of Helsinki and Vienna and the principles of the European Convention of Human Rights. Above all, it was inspired by belief in the values and living ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which proclaims that everyone is entitled to all its rights and freedoms without distinction of any kind.

As the European Union enlarges to become a community of values shared now by 25 states and many peoples and minorities, I am honoured at this Conference to confirm that the European Union stands against anti-Semitism, intolerance and discrimination and stands for the right of all people everywhere to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in a free, democratic pluralist society.

We will work therefore to ensure that this Conference makes a lasting difference in the struggle to combat anti-Semitism and to build peace at home and in our neighbourhood.

The Acceding Countries Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia and the Candidate Countries Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey align themselves with this statement.