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United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report by the High Commissioner on National Minorities, Amb. Knut Vollebaek

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Carol Fuller
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 29, 2009

The United States warmly welcomes Ambassador Vollebaek back to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his excellent report.

As we mentioned during last week's Corfu process meeting, treatment of minorities is at the heart of many of Europe's potential, active or frozen conflicts. The persistence of tension and conflict over minority issues means it is imperative for us to do even more to address not only the causes, but also the conditions or actions that can exacerbate conflict.

The United States continues to support High Commissioner Vollebaek and his team, and their persistent and even-handed focus on improving education, participation by minorities in public life, and relations between states and minorities in neighboring states with whom they share ethnic affinities.

We welcome your efforts, Ambassador Vollebaek, to improve bilateral relations between Russia and Ukraine on these issues, and are pleased to see that both parties have reacted positively to your recommendations thus far.

We are particularly concerned about tensions in the Crimean peninsula, and agree on the need to develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with this situation. We appreciate your facilitation of the drafting of legislation regarding formerly deported minorities in Ukraine that would meaningfully address disputes over land, property issues and cultural rights. We are also interested in receiving more information on the project "Culture of Good Neighborhood," and wonder if it could serve as a model for other regions.

In Kazakhstan, we appreciate your work to ensure that minority populations—particularly the Uighur and Uzbek communities—are fully integrated into the Kazakhstani educational system. We welcome your plans to monitor—in conjunction with the government—the educational situation of Uighurs in Almaty and its region. Like you, we commend Kazakhstan for taking up your recommendations on including minority language schools in the trilingual education program and for unambiguously ensuring that promotion of the official state language will not be at the expense of any other language spoken in Kazakhstan. These are positive developments.

Your work in Southeast Europe is helping to consolidate gains made in interethnic relations and is an important part of building the foundation for long-term stability. We highly value your efforts, in coordination with other international organizations and bilateral donors, to assist authorities in Macedonia to address the issue of ethnically separated education. Likewise, we commend your work in Kosovo to help the public understand the concept and value of transitional justice and to keep the issue on the political agenda, and your work on minority education issues.

We strongly support your continued engagement in Georgia, where your efforts to call attention to the situation of ethnic minorities, particularly in Gali and Akhgori, are especially important. We remain concerned by the issues identified in your November 2008 joint report with ODIHR on a lack of human rights protections in the war-affected areas of Georgia. We once more urge the implementation of the report's recommendations, and reiterate our call for a follow-up assessment mission to ascertain the current human rights and humanitarian situation in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia. We look forward to your planned visit early next year, and hope you and your office will continue your efforts to prevent further conflict and ensure respect for human rights and humanitarian law throughout Georgia.

We applaud Slovakia and Hungary's decision to work with you to find common resolutions for resolving tensions in their bilateral relations. We call on other participating States to follow this example and work together with the High Commissioner to address areas of concern before the situation escalates.

Ambassador Vollebaek, we commend your essential work to prevent conflict on minority issues, which also advances respect for human rights and promotes inter-ethnic harmony throughout the OSCE area. We wish you every success in your work for the upcoming year.

Thank you, Madam Chair.