

**PREPARATORY NGO FORUM
FOR THE OSCE CONFERENCE ON ANTI-SEMITISM AND OTHER FORMS OF
INTOLERANCE**

(Seville, 7 June 2005)

**Remarks by Ambassador Ömür Orhun,
Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE
on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination Against Muslims**

Today, just before the opening of the OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance in Cordoba, we are gathered here, in Seville, to discuss contributions that the civil society can make to combating a cluster of interrelated problems, namely racism, xenophobia and all forms of intolerance and discrimination, including against Muslims, and anti-Semitism. At the outset, I would like to commend Tres Culturas for organizing this NGO Forum, which is a well-considered initiative.

Racism, xenophobia, intolerance and discrimination unfortunately persist in all our societies in varying forms and degrees. Countries that are proud to call themselves advanced democracies are no exception.

Discrimination in legislative frameworks and in administrative measures constitutes the picture at surface level, but more is to be said on discrimination and intolerance which are actually rooted within individual perceptions based mostly on stereotypes.

Everyone has a task to perform in this struggle, and by no means should the organized power of the civil society be excluded or relegated to the back benches in our institutional efforts within the OSCE framework.

The emphasis that I made on individual perceptions merits further explanation as I will try later, but foremost I must clarify one important point; that the source of intolerance and discrimination should be sought within inter-human relations rather than international politics.

Compared with the ideological confrontation between the East and the West throughout the Cold War, today's world can be seen in a process of regression, taking into account the rising cultural radicalism, ethnic chauvinism and other forms of intolerance and discrimination which lack intellectual foundations. These attitudes produce insecurity within modern societies and are based on very primitive perceptions which still persist despite the progress that we made in human rights education, information technologies and communication. This situation reflects an intellectual regression in our societies.

As many crises accumulated throughout the world and as the proliferation of the terrorist threat paved the way for global insecurity, the pseudo-perception of international relations as a clash of civilizations found a self-justification. This is not acceptable. The world should not be seen as a conglomerate of hostilities among nations, cultures and religions: There is still hope for inter-cultural and inter-religious harmony.

Here, it should be underlined that the impediments against religious liberties in the OSCE region must not be seen solely as acts of intolerance and discrimination based on cultural bigotry. In many cases, questions related to religious liberties are subject matters of politics which is different from the realm of inter-individual relationships where discrimination and intolerance arise. The political realm has its own rules defined through intensive deliberations aiming at a stable regime and a consistent legal framework. It has a different nature than each individual's expression of his/her cultural identity. Liberties and responsibilities should be seen by this perspective taking into account the fragile and sensitive relationship between religious aspirations and political regimes. In other words, religions should not be politicized and politics should not be used to exploit religious attachments.

On the other hand, as discrimination and intolerance rise within the modern society, it must be addressed in a participatory manner. Governments, under various international instruments setting up explicit goals, measures and implementation mechanisms, have undertaken commitments to repeal discriminatory legislation, to provide effective protection against racist abuses and to address the root causes of racism, racial discrimination and related intolerance.

I would also like to underline that the normative framework adopted by the OSCE and by other international organizations is quite adequate. What is needed is to put this framework into full practice.

As Personal Representatives of the Chairman-in-Office, my mandate has been defined as promoting better coordination of participating State's efforts aimed at the effective implementation of OSCE decisions in the field of tolerance and non-discrimination, paying special attention to combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, cooperating and coordinating with the other personal representatives on combating intolerance and discrimination, with the ODIHR, and with other OSCE institutions.

Now, in my capacity as the Personal Representative on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, I would like to draw your attention to the following points:

Muslims in European countries have always encountered problems since their ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural differences from the host societies are more distinct or more pronounced as compared to other migrant groups.

This already negative phenomenon acquired even greater proportions in the post-September 11 period. Muslims have been subjected to growing distrust and hostility. A perception of the threat of a so-called "Islamic extremism" is shared by many people and prejudice, bias and discrimination against Muslims have become more visible. The recent IHF (International Helsinki Federation) report revealed that Muslims who live in Western countries are stigmatized because of their beliefs.

Despite the prevalence of the age of information, people in host societies may lack knowledge about foreigners and immigrants. The problems of those foreigners and immigrants might be neglected. Their aspirations and needs might be underestimated and their hope to be part of a more secure world might be frustrated. Awareness-raising should be seen also in this context as the most fruitful way to deal with intolerance and discrimination; hence it should be prioritized also by the civil society.

The civil society should also be consulted. NGOs can achieve important tasks to counter the rising intolerance and discrimination. The rising Islamophobia in the Western world is a fact and it should be countered with the contributions of the civil society. Human rights defenders within societies where discrimination, intolerance and xenophobia are practiced should intervene actively to protect and to promote the rights of everyone. It should not be forgotten that efforts to cope with discrimination and intolerance can yield positive results only if a joint and combined front could be formed.

To cope with discrimination and intolerance-related problems, I would like to bring to your attention the importance of integration as a shared responsibility, the effective protection of vulnerable groups before the law and in practice, respect for diversity, openness to dialogue, and respect for "the other".

I would like to end my remarks in that respect by quoting the UN Millenium Declaration:

"Human beings must respect one another, in all their diversity of belief, culture and language. Differences within and between societies should be neither feared nor repressed, but cherished as a precious asset of humanity. A culture of peace and dialogue among all civilizations should be actively promoted."