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PERMANENT MISSION OF THE HOLY SEE  
TO THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY  
AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

**STATEMENT BY MONSIGNOR MICHAEL W. BANACH,  
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE HOLY SEE,  
AT THE 687<sup>th</sup> MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

**8 NOVEMBER 2007**

**RE: REPORT BY THE OSCE HIGH COMMISSIONER  
ON NATIONAL MINORITIES**

Mr. Chairman,

1. The Holy See also joins other Delegations in congratulating Ambassador Knut Vollebaek on his appointment as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, as well as in warmly welcoming him to his first appearance before the Permanent Council in his new role. Welcome back to Ambassador Brendan Moran.

2. Ambassador Vollebaek's Report indicates how in his first 81 days in office he has dedicated himself fully, and with enthusiasm and professionalism, to the all-important task of *"providing early warning and, as appropriate, early action in regard to tensions involving national minority issues"*. In fact, the question of national minorities continues to assume a notable importance. Consequently, it constitutes a matter for careful reflection on the part of political and religious leaders and all men and women of good will. My Delegation would like to encourage Ambassador Vollebaek in his work of *"quiet diplomacy"*.

3. As communities which take their origin from different religious, racial and ethnic stock, national minority groups exist in almost all societies today. Some go very far back in time, others are of recent origin. As Ambassador Vollebaek's Report illustrates, the situations in which they live are so diverse that it is almost impossible to draw up a complete picture of them. On the one hand there are groups, even very small ones, which are able to preserve and affirm their own identity and are well integrated within the societies to which they belong. In some cases, such minority groups even succeed in exercising a strong influence on the majority in public life. On the other hand one sees national minorities which exert no influence and do not fully enjoy their rights, but rather find themselves in situations of suffering and distress. This can lead them either to passive resignation or to unrest and even rebellion. Yet, neither passivity nor violence represents the proper path for creating conditions of true peace.

4. In this context, my Delegation would like to highlight briefly two considerations that we consider indispensable in any consideration of national minorities. First, the inalienable dignity of every human person, irrespective of racial, ethnic, cultural or national origin, or religious belief. Individuals do not exist for themselves alone, but achieve their full identity in relation to others. The same can be said about groups of people. They indeed have a right to a collective identity that must be safeguarded, in accordance with the dignity of each member. Such a right remains intact even in cases in which part of the group, or one of its members, acts illegitimately. In such situations, the alleged abuse must be addressed by the competent authorities, without the whole group being condemned, since that would be against justice. At the same time, the members of national minority groups have the duty to treat others with the same respect and sense of dignity.

Secondly, the right to religious freedom. This right applies to all religious communities, as well as to individuals, and includes the free manifestation of religious beliefs, both individually and collectively. Consequently, religious minorities must be able to worship as a community, according to their own rites. They must also be in a position to provide religious education through appropriate teaching programmes and to utilize the necessary means to this end. Moreover, it is very important that the State should effectively ensure and promote the observance of religious freedom, especially when, alongside the great majority who follow one religion, there exist one or more minority groups of another faith.

Mister Chairman,

5. The increased awareness which is found today at every level regarding the situation of national minority groups constitutes for our own times a hopeful sign for the coming generations and for the aspirations of national minority groups themselves. Indeed, in a sense, respect for national minorities is to be considered the touchstone of social harmony and the index of the civic maturity attained by a country and its institutions. In a truly democratic society, to guarantee the participation of national minorities in political life is a sign of a highly developed civilization, and it brings honour upon those nations in which all citizens are guaranteed a share in national life in a climate of true freedom.

6. In conclusion, Mister Chairman, I would like to recall the words Pope Benedict XVI addressed just last Sunday to a group of pilgrims gathered in Saint Peter's Square. He said: *"It is my wish that the relations between migrant populations and local populations develop in the spirit of that high moral civility that is the fruit of spiritual and cultural values of every people and country. May those who work in favor of security and hospitality know how to use appropriate means to guarantee the rights and duties that are the foundation of all true common life and encounters among peoples"*.

This is also the wish of my Delegation for Ambassador Vollebaek in the exercise of his new mandate.

Thank you, Mister Chairman.