

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2015
Statement by the Delegation of Canada
Wednesday, September 30, 2015

Working Session 15 – Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

Madam Moderator,

Religious persecution is a growing global issue. It is imperative that all countries work to respect, protect and advance the right to freedom of religion or belief around the world. We must be willing to speak out on egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and be willing to denounce violence against human rights defenders and attacks on places of worship around the world.

Although the OSCE region tends to fare better than others, a 2015 Pew Research Study shows that restrictions have still disconcertingly increased since 2007. Five OSCE participating States rank as having very high government restrictions on exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief, and another 9 with high restrictions.

One major challenge faced by religious communities in those States is the lack of recognition resulting from onerous and opaque state registration procedures; this prevents these communities from practicing their faith freely and without discrimination. We hope that the ODIHR's 2015 Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities will help participating States address these issues. We welcome this year's focus at the OSCE on interfaith and intercultural dialogue, but for such dialogues to be truly inclusive, States must recognize and respect the rights of individuals belonging to religious communities.

Madam Moderator,

Canada understands - and research shows - that religious freedom, pluralism, peace and security foster the growth of strong democratic institutions and long-term prosperity. Individuals who are free to practice their faith in safety and security are also free to contribute to the economic, cultural and political developments of their country, for the benefit of all. This is why Canada is proud to support ODIHR's programs on religious freedom as well as to note our three-year, \$950,000 project with the OSCE through the Office of Religious Freedom to increase awareness of international standards on religious freedom, to prevent and respond to hate crimes, and to facilitate multi-community dialogue on issues related to religious freedom.

Canada's recommendations for this session are:

- For OSCE participating States, to ensure that legislation pertaining to registration of religious organizations embrace the principles of Article 18 of the ICCPR and are not used to obstruct and curtail activities of religious communities;
- For OSCE participating States, to respect the right of those individuals who wish to change their religion or belief, or to hold no belief;
- For OSCE participating States, to ensure that religious communities are able to peacefully practice their religion without the threat of violence and persecution.
- For OSCE participating States, to cooperate and work closely with ODIHR's Human Rights and Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Departments to benefit from their expertise and experience, so as to foster the implementation of their OSCE commitments on Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, as well as combat hate crime and discrimination on the basis of religion.