



OSCE Conference on Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims
Cordoba, 9 -10 October 2007

Speech by the Head of the Swiss Delegation, Dr. Anton Thalmann, Deputy State Secretary

Mr Chairman
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

Since the conference on anti-semitism and other forms of intolerance that was held here in the historically important city of Cordoba in 2005, societies and governments in our participating States have had to deal with fundamental questions of tolerance towards and discrimination against members of certain religious groups. The last OSCE conference on this subject was held in Bucharest in June of this year. The discussions there confirmed that the course adopted more than two years ago was the right one.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Spanish chairman for providing the OSCE with an opportunity, once again, to state its unequivocal condemnation of intolerance and discrimination, particularly against Muslims.

Mr Chairman,

The 13th of September was the beginning of the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan and also of the Jewish New Year. A time of reflection and of contemplation, providing an opportunity for communication and dialogue and for better mutual understanding. This is urgently necessary, because in our societies rejection of Muslims and Jews, of Christians and members other faith communities and also of non-believers has become more marked. This dangerous tendency affects our fundamental values. It is not a matter only of mutual tolerance but of our conception of society and of the state. Our state has to protect the freedom of religion and worship, and to promote respect for those of different faiths and philosophies.

Unfortunately my country is not immune to incidents motivated by incomprehension and fear and often also by contempt for those who hold different beliefs. We are perfectly aware of this.

Mr Chairman,

You, Ambassador Orhun, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, will visit Switzerland in November on behalf of the Spanish chair. You will be met not only by representatives of the Anti-Racism Unit, federal bodies, cantonal and municipal governments but also by the Federal Commission on Foreigners and the Federal Commission against Racism. The two last-mentioned bodies include migrants and representatives of all religions who are working together for better integration and for active measures against discrimination and racism. Both commissions have looked carefully at the situation of Muslims in Switzerland and have, from their different perspectives, published substantial reports on these questions.

Switzerland has a long tradition of inter-religious dialogue. Past conflicts in Switzerland have taught us that although the state must be the guarantor of religious freedom, co-existence between people of different religious backgrounds is a daily challenge, one that has to be met at the local level day in, day out by all concerned. We believe that our system, which has developed organically and in which the cantons - according to their own needs within the framework of our Federal Constitution - regulate the relationship between the state and the religious communities, can best provide adequate solutions for the Islamic community of Switzerland. An Islamic community which is highly diverse and comes from many different parts of the world. The many and varied private initiatives at municipal, cantonal and federal level - such as the Council of Religions - promote the dialogue between religions.

Mr Chairman,

In the light of occurrences and developments in recent years, not only individual states but the OSCE as a whole are facing a challenge. Today we must all, both in Switzerland and in the entire OSCE area, firmly reject all forms of discrimination, whether they are directed in specific cases against Muslims, other religious communities or non-believers. This conference should make a valuable contribution to these endeavours.

As in Bucharest in June, we will exchange opinions and experiences in formal and in informal frameworks but we will also look at possible solutions.

I would like to conclude by thanking the Spanish Chairman-in-Office and host once again for your efforts to ensure that this conference is a success.

Thank you for your attention.