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AT THE 1287th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

29 October 2020

On serious human rights violations in the United States of America

Mr. Chairperson,

We should like once again to draw attention to the serious human rights violations in the United States of America. We have repeatedly pointed to the disturbing stories of chronic police violence and systemic racism in that country, including this year. One gets the feeling that not only are these problems not being tackled by the US authorities, but rather that they are getting worse.

Five months after the brutal killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis and the mass demonstrations that swept through the country, history is unfortunately repeating itself. Last week in Waukegan, a police officer shot and killed the unarmed 19-year-old African American Marcellis Stinette and wounded the woman driving the vehicle he was in.

In Philadelphia on Monday, two law enforcement officers killed Walter Wallace, also an African American, while making an arrest. Although Wallace was armed with a knife, witnesses to the incident claim that the officers fired far more shots than the situation demanded. They aimed at his chest and shoulder; in other words, they shot to kill. Moreover, the police were well aware that Wallace's mental illness had become more acute. Under these circumstances, it is a rhetorical question to ask whether the officers' actions can be described as legitimate self-defence.

Yet another tragic incident took place in Washington, D.C., on 26 October, when the African American Karon Hylton was killed while being chased by the police. His friends and relatives are convinced that the police deliberately hit his moped and made it crash into another vehicle.

The reaction of the US public, tired of years, nay decades of police brutality and racial profiling, was predictable. On the night of Monday to Tuesday, another wave of mass protests swept through Philadelphia, Washington and New York. There was significant property damage as a result, and dozens of people, including reporters covering the events, were injured. Among others, the Russian Channel One camera crew was attacked, causing a cameraman to suffer concussion. Meanwhile, the police did practically nothing. Inevitably, the law enforcement officers used riot equipment, including tear gas, against the demonstrators.

We condemn the attacks on law enforcement officers by participants in these protests, but this does not justify the excessive use of force by the police.

The protests that are erupting across the country provide clear evidence that the US authorities are unable, and maybe even unwilling, to tackle the underlying causes of these current events. We are talking about the systemic racism and police brutality in the country, which US and foreign human rights activists, along with prominent international organizations, including the OSCE and the United Nations, have been pointing out for decades.

Moreover, practices that are far removed from democracy are gaining currency. For example, *The New York Review* recently reported that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Fly Team, a counter-terrorism unit, was hacking into the smartphones of demonstrators in Portland. It is unclear what authority this FBI unit had and whether the agents had the consent of the owners of the confiscated smartphones or a court order. However, it is worrying that the technology for hacking into terrorist equipment is being used in the United States against peaceful demonstrators, who are thereby being put on the same footing as terrorists.

We would stress the evident reason for the killing of African Americans over and over again by police officers: it is systemic racism, which permeates practically all spheres of US society, including law enforcement.

Police brutality against blacks is indeed a most serious problem. According to the US project “Mapping Police Violence”, out of the 850 fatal victims of such violence so far in 2020, 238, or 28 per cent, were African Americans, although blacks make up only 13 per cent of the population of the United States. They are three times more likely than whites to be killed by law enforcement officers. Yet, African Americans are more than 1.3 times more likely to be unarmed in such cases.

In general, the project researchers come to an interesting conclusion: police brutality is unconnected with the crime rate in any particular city in the United States. Impunity also reigns: between 2013 and 2020, only 1.7 per cent of police officers who committed homicide were prosecuted.

In addition, the BBC reports that African Americans are five times more likely to be locked up than white Americans and twice as likely as Hispanics. In 2018, for example, African Americans and white Americans each accounted for approximately 30 per cent of the prison population, yet the former make up 13 per cent of the country’s population, while the latter more than 60 per cent. To put it differently, there are around 1,000 African Americans in jail for every 100,000 in the general population. For every 100,000 white US citizens, on the other hand, only around 200 are in jail.

Over the past ten years, the number of African Americans sentenced to imprisonment has decreased, but it is still higher than for any other ethnic group.

The systemic nature of racism in the United States in a broader sense is illustrated by the Interim Report issued on 22 October by the Limited Election Observation Mission of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) sent to observe the general election in that country. The experts again emphasized the under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in public office and their difficulties in registering as voters, not to mention the problem of the disenfranchisement of millions of African Americans. I should like to note that the ODIHR voices these complaints to the US Government at every election.

We wish to draw particular attention to the way the safety of journalists covering protests is provided for in the United States. According to the US Press Freedom Tracker website, as of 22 October, there had been over 875 incidents involving journalists in the country, including 121 arrests, 158 physical attacks by the police and 100 instances of tear gas spraying and the like. And these are only the recorded incidents.

Under these circumstances, it is simply unacceptable to pretend that the United States remains at the vanguard of human rights.

We once again call on the US Government to strictly honour its OSCE commitments and to fully ensure the rights and freedoms of all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity. All incidents should be painstakingly investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice. The OSCE's human rights structures should keep a close watch on the situation and report to the participating States on the measures taken.

Thank you for your attention.