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OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Working session 14: Fundamental freedoms II, including freedom of thought,
conscience, religion and belief
Remarks by Azerbaijan
Delivered by Mr. Rashad Shirinov
01 October 2014

Mr. President,

As it is the first time that I take the floor I would like to express our gratitude for OSCE chairmanship and ODIHR staff for the smooth organization of this year's HDIM. The topic under discussion is pivotal importance for us. In that regard, I would like to make some observations and remarks with a view of sharing our national experience in strengthening the better promotion and protection of freedoms of thought, conscience, religion and belief.

As a bridge between cultures and active member of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations, Azerbaijan feels responsible for promoting inter-religious and intercultural dialogue based on mutual respect and understanding. Having deep and strong roots of respect towards the diversity of cultures and tolerance, Azerbaijan believes that peoples of different religions and backgrounds can only be gathered together through dialogue, indulgence and tolerance in this turbulent and anxious world.

Representatives of all nationalities and religions live in our country in peace and mutual understanding. The multicultural dialogue in our country can be used as an example of peaceful coexistence between people of different religions and backgrounds.

Mr. Chair,

We would like to inform this session along with our deliberations here today the Baku city is hosting the third International Humanitarian Forum in which come together the world leaders, heads of international organizations, prominent public figures, academic circles and world mass media representatives again in our capital. We are of the view that such kinds of events strongly highlight the importance of dialogue, tolerance and mutual respect through the intensive exchange of views among peoples and nations.

Being a country with long-standing traditions of tolerance, non-discrimination and peace, Azerbaijan attaches great importance to the intercultural and interreligious dialogue and continues to contribute to this crucial endeavor. For many centuries Muslims, Christians and Jews have been continuing to live side by side in our country in conditions of peace, tolerance and mutual respect. They all take part in the political, socio-economic and cultural life of the country and make contribution to Azerbaijan's development. Azerbaijan currently has more than 1.800 mosques, 5

Orthodox churches, 1 Catholic church, 1 Lutheran church, 1 Albano-Udi, 4 Greek Orthodox churches, 6 synagogues and other houses of worship in operation. The Government is utterly committed to the restoration and reconstruction of the monuments reflecting the cultural heritage and historical past of the Azerbaijani nation and other national minorities residing in our country with a view of preserving them for future generations.

Taking advantage of its own riches and cultural legacy, Azerbaijan is currently assisting in the cultural and religious diversity all over the world. We would like to point out the work of the non-governmental Heydar Aliyev Foundation which provided financial assistance for the restoration of the 14th century Strasbourg Cathedral in June 2009. It also provided material assistance for the repair of two monuments featured at the Palace of Versailles and the Louvre Museum.

At the same time, we are of the view that the role of education presents greater value in terms of ensuring the preservation of religious and cultural uniqueness and diversity in the country. For example, in Azerbaijan the religious centers and institutions existing are having cooperation with the relevant centers abroad and closely participate in the international religious ceremonies. Such centers and institutions offer among others religious education in Hebrew, Jewish religion and culture, Bible courses and other peculiar activities attributed to the specific religious traditions.

One of the crucial factors that would contribute to strengthening the trust between different civilizations from our point of view is the cultural diplomacy. Hosting various events on the different aspects of realization of freedom of religion and belief provides the participating countries with much more opportunities to strengthen their efforts to foster religious harmony and tolerance through cultural exchange and dialogue.

As a multinational and multi-religious country the Republic of Azerbaijan is keen on steering its activities through the principles of tolerance and coexistence of various nationalities, ethnic groups and religious minorities.

Problems faced by the religious communities are regularly investigated and relevant governmental agencies render necessary assistance to solve them.

It is our strong conviction that while the national authorities should respect the religious communities' right to freedom of religion or belief, the religious communities should also abide by the national legislation by rejecting all forms of intolerance, spreading radicalism and extremism.

Unfortunately, we are currently witnessing the rise of religious intolerance and hostility, in particular its contemporary manifestations in several parts of the world. Stereotyping of religions, prejudice and insult to religious feelings sometimes hiding behind freedom of expression are taking shape of trend which may have many ramifications. The place of worship, religious sites are still deliberate subject of

attack and vandalism, especially when it comes to the context of international armed conflicts.

We condemn all discriminatory, intolerant acts on the grounds of religion and belief and also in the name of religion which tarnish the image of religions. Followers of religion should not fall prey to disastrous and odious notions such as extremism and radicalism. Religious communities while enjoying the rights bestowed on them by the national legislation of host countries should also come up to their respective commitments.

However, against the background of the successful and constant promotion of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and tolerance, Azerbaijan is still faced by the ongoing armed aggression by the neighboring country results of which left the religious and cultural monuments in the occupied territories of our country fully destroyed.

We would call OSCE to pay much closer and needed attention to the desecration and destruction of cultural and religious monuments in the occupied territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan. We are fully convinced only through concerted international efforts such shameful acts of violence could be prevented and their results and consequences eliminated.

Thank you for attention.