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## **The Netherlands Presidency of the European Union**

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### **Statement by Ms. Rita Verdonk, Minister for Integration and Immigration of the Netherlands, on behalf of the European Union**

#### **OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight Against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination Brussels, 13 September 2004**

Mister Moderator,

I am honoured to address this gathering today on behalf of the European Union. A Union which is defined by its commitment to the principles of liberty and democracy. And by its respect for the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms. The EU is built upon these principles after Europe had seen the horrors of war, racism and intolerance. They are the result of our efforts to end thousands of years of strife and repression within Europe.

We have learned our lesson. But there are new challenges facing our societies in this era of globalisation. To ensure stability and peace, the EU must promote and protect its fundamental principles in both its internal and its external policies. Tolerance, non-discrimination and equality are fully enshrined in Europe's institutional framework. This framework was further strengthened in June when the European Council adopted a draft Constitution for Europe, including a Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The European Union has always actively promoted these rights – within the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the United Nations. All 25 EU member states, for example, are parties to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racism and Discrimination. Just review the many declarations, decisions and resolutions adopted or otherwise supported.

This institutional framework may be a source of satisfaction - The world we live in is often not. Human rights are still violated, despite our best efforts. Discrimination based on colour, race and national or ethnic origin remains widespread in the OSCE area. And on top of this people also suffer unequal treatment on grounds of religion, social origin, sex and gender identity - just to name a few.

I call on all participating States to join our efforts to eliminate racism and other forms of intolerance. Establishing a legal framework is important, but it is not enough. We must focus on concrete action. And to begin with, we must continue with the implementation of the framework and instruments set in place by the mandates from Maastricht, Paris, Berlin and –hopefully- Brussels.

On the other hand, a number of concrete steps have already been taken. These efforts bear fruit. And of course, they also deserve attention.

For instance, the EU clearly attaches great importance to monitoring racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance. As a result, we have set up the EU Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia in Vienna. The European Council decided last year to

establish this Centre as a true human rights agency for the EU. The Centre supports the work of the EU by providing objective, reliable and comparable information and data on racism, xenophobia, islamophobia and anti-Semitism. This information helps member states to establish measures and formulate policies against these forms of intolerance.

Also, most of the EU states have prepared a national action plan against racism as a follow-up to the UN World Conference in Durban. In the Netherlands, several ministries joined forces to prepare the Dutch plan.

And naturally, there is the OSCE's strong position in this field. We appreciate how the Bulgarian Chairman-in-Office has made the fight for tolerance and non-discrimination one of this year's central themes. We have already seen the results of the meeting in Berlin on anti-Semitism and the one in Paris on racism and the Internet.

Another good example of concrete action is the OSCE's attempt to improve data collection based on factual analysis, accurate reports and reliable information. The Maastricht OSCE Ministerial Meeting asked the ODIHR to take over this task. It is true that to be successful we must know what it is we are discussing. We expect that, as the ODIHR carries out the Maastricht initiative, it will work closely with the EUMC. And the European Union will offer its co-operation without any reservation. The same holds true for co-operation with the Council of Europe, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and the United Nations. The issue is too important for overlapping efforts or - worse - quarrel about it. On the contrary, close collaboration and use of the comparative advantages and specific experiences of each organisation will help bring about optimal results.

Finally, when it comes down to concrete action, we are grateful to the Belgian government for its generosity in hosting this conference.

We hope that this Brussels Conference will prove to be another important step in the OSCE's ongoing fight to eliminate discrimination.

These positive concrete actions notwithstanding, it is still necessary to reflect on the future. To contemplate on how we will cope with European and world wide developments. In this respect, we have to recognise that in the last few years we are confronted with some less positive developments – in all 55 of our participating States. I would like to mention three of them in particular.

First, terrorism poses a dual threat. Terrorist acts are acts of hatred to begin with. In addition, the fight against terrorism poses great challenges to civil liberties and human rights. I ask that you be aware of the risk of identifying – for no good reason – entire groups of people with terrorists or their supporters. The danger is greatest when accusations fall on fertile ground and create suspicions against groups of people said to be “outside” the mainstream.

Second, we are witnessing a growing number of migrants. They arrive via a number of channels- legally and illegally. Immigrant status must never be a ground for discrimination, and we must be diligent in our attempts to prevent this. On the other hand, the process of integrating the first, second and third generations can be improved. We need to pay more attention to social cohesion in our communities – not an easy task in diverse societies. To do this successfully, we need to address tensions between groups in an open and transparent manner.

Third, anti-Semitism has reared its ugly head again. The Berlin conference identified a course of action against anti-Semitism, but we must look further afield in order to strengthen our counter-action.

Mister Moderator,

Finding solutions for these developments will be a complicated task. But all forms of discrimination must be addressed if we want to guarantee freedom, equal rights and respect to all. There is no hierarchy of discrimination and intolerance. All forms of intolerance impact directly on people – they are the ones that suffer.

The European Union attaches great importance to a joint effort in the fight against all forms of intolerance, racism, xenophobia and discrimination. The issue is high on the agenda of Europe's policymakers. And finding the most appropriate way to deal with it is not easy. Like intolerance, the fight against it takes many forms. Education and awareness raising campaigns are urgently needed. Law enforcement agencies must be aware of unacceptable actions and deal with them effectively.

But in our fight we must not be blind for the deeper social and cultural problems that create a breeding ground for racism and other forms of intolerance. We must recognise these problems. Although there is never an excuse for discrimination and racism, we must realize that dialogue and partnership are necessary if we want to teach people to live together in peace – and this is a two-way street. All parties are needed and must join forces in a common fight against all forms of intolerance and discrimination.

This will be our great challenge for the coming years. For the EU and its individual member states, but also for the OSCE as a whole.

Thank you.