

PC.DEL/723/10
5 July 2010

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

Delegation of Belgium

**STATEMENT BY MR. MICHEL GOFFIN,
DEPUTY DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE DIRECTORATE GENERAL
FOR MULTILATERAL AFFAIRS AND GLOBALIZATION,
AT THE OSCE HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON
TOLERANCE AND NON-DISCRIMINATION**

Astana, 29 and 30 June 2010

**Plenary session 1: Combating intolerance and discrimination
against Muslims**

Mr. Moderator,

Permit me first to thank the Kazakh Chairmanship for organizing the present Conference on this very topical subject. Globalization has made our societies more multicultural, and the risk of discrimination has also increased. Non-discrimination and the promotion of tolerance are therefore crucial to allow all to live harmoniously in diversity.

Our societies are increasingly multireligious in composition. Religious tolerance is therefore, more than ever, a precondition if our citizens are to be able to live together in a harmonious manner. Belgium, from the time of its creation in 1830, has developed an original approach in relation to the religious confessions. The Constitution establishes the principle of freedom of religion, a prohibition on compelling others to practise a religion, and the principle of the separation of Church and State, this being understood to mean non-interference by the State in the internal organization of their own affairs by the different confessions.

To this freedom of religion must be added the official recognition of certain religious confessions, either for historical reasons or because they meet certain jurisprudential criteria such as the number of adherents, social utility, the creation of a representative body able to represent the confession in relations with the civil authorities, and the length of time that it has existed in Belgium. The recognition of a religious confession has, *inter alia*, the effect that the ministers of the confession receive salaries and pensions at the cost of the State, under Article 181 of the Constitution. Recognition also entails the organization of classes on religion, for two hours per week, in Belgian educational establishments, pupils having the right to attend the classes pertaining to the confession of their choice. Regarding this last point, I would urge the participating States to adopt the same policy.

Around the middle of the 1960s, as a result of economic developments in the industrial sector, the number of Muslims living in Belgium gradually increased. As a result,

the Islamic faith was recognized in 1974 and now enjoys the same benefits as the other recognized confessions.

This legislative framework shows the clear will of the Belgian State to give religious confessions freedom to develop and organize without interference, and to facilitate dialogue between the confessions and the civil authorities.

Our societies are the first beneficiaries of the protection of religious freedom. This protection allows citizens to develop spiritually, and religion is often a source of inspiration in their lives. Although religious freedom is vigorously defended in Belgium, we must also ensure that, in this process of protection, limitations are not placed on other human rights such as the right to freedom of expression or gender equality. For tolerance, properly understood, has a dual meaning – on the one hand, respect for others, but also, on the other hand, an openness to criticism, even when it is not very constructive.

Mr. Moderator,

In conclusion, I should like to reaffirm that the point of departure for Belgium continues to be that human rights are universal, indivisible and common to all the world's regions and cultures. We have a duty to combat all forms of discrimination and we must fight to promote the universality of human rights. Defence of the principle that human rights are universal loses its credibility and impact if we act selectively.