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At the request of Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, please find attached for distribution his remarks at the International Colloquium organized by COJEP International at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva on 12 April 2007, on “Incitement to Racial and Religious Hatred – Islamophobia and the Media”.

**Remarks by Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the OSCE
Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims,
at the International Colloquium organized by COJEP International
at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva on 12 April 2007,
on “Incitement to Racial and Religious Hatred – Islamophobia and the Media”**

MEDIA DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIMS

First of all, I would like to underline my appreciation to COJEP International for organizing this colloquium on “Incitement to Racial and Religious Hatred - Islamophobia and the Media”. I believe this is a very important and topical subject.

I will be speaking more generally on the media discourse and representation of Muslims in Western countries.

During my tenure since 2004 and within the scope of my activities, one problem emerged at the forefront; namely the media discourse and representation about Islam in general and about Muslims in particular in the Western media. This fact has also been reflected in the reports of leading international human rights organizations.

When it comes to reporting on Muslim communities, the media is found to be overly selective, one sided, simplistic and clichéd. Muslims, on their part, feel overwhelmingly discriminated against, as a result of news stories and commentaries which portray a negative image of their culture and religion in the public consciousness. For instance, a recent case of an honour killing (which of course I strongly deplore) resulted in an avalanche of news stories in the media of an OSCE participating State. While this was a deplorable but isolated incident, the disproportional media coverage provided the impression that honour killings or forced marriages are quite common within the Islamic culture. Unbalanced reporting also reinforces

stereotypes and provides the reader with the impression that the entire Muslim community is prone to violence, abusive towards women, rigid and monolithic.

The same goes for identification of Muslims and Islam with terrorism. Even most reliable media outlets use terms such as “Islamic terrorism”, whereas terrorism has no religion.

On the other hand, media reporting to the effect that Islamic way of life and Islam itself is a barrier before liberal democratic thought and that Islam represents a culture that cannot possibly achieve harmony with the modern world is another source of stigmatization felt by Muslims.

As the so-called cartoon crisis amply demonstrated, the problem before us is very complicated, has different aspects, and is not related solely to the freedom of expression or of the media.

There is no doubt that freedom of expression is among the basic prerequisites of truly democratic and civil societies.

However, as many prominent representatives of international organizations also stressed, both from an international and national legal point of view and also from a moral perspective, there are limits to the freedom of expression.

Indeed, the European Court of Human Rights, as reflected in many of its decisions, has established that incitement to hatred or incitement which would generate violence and blasphemous publications offending religious feelings are not permitted by the European Convention of Human Rights.

On the other hand, from a moral point of view, leading statesmen of the West and of the East, as well as leaders of international organizations have clearly stated that the boundaries of freedom of expression have been crossed in the cartoons case.

Another dimension of the issue before us is the residual impact of Islamophobia that emerged especially in the wake of September 11. The unfortunate publications of the cartoons

on top of the ongoing negative and biased media representation concerning Muslims and Islam have created an atmosphere of tension almost bounding to a polarization between the East and the West, and between the Islamic and Christian worlds as never witnessed before in recent decades.

I will now try to address the question on the relationship between media freedom and media responsibility.

I believe all concerned should appeal for moderation and restraint, both vis-à-vis exercising freedom of expression with due respect for religious and moral values of others and sensitivities of everybody; as well as vis-à-vis the reaction one would like to display in view of offensive gestures or discourse, by strongly underlining disapproval of violence.

We should also appeal for increased dialogue, understanding and respect, especially respect to “the other”.

Having said that, let me stress that I am not suggesting an increase in the governmental role in regulating the media. On the contrary, I believe the remedy should come from the journalists themselves.

In that context, I would simply refer to declarations and statements of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ).

The 1998 IFJ Congress in its Resolution on Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance noted with alarm the rise in racism and extremist political movements which try to manipulate media and agreed to promote joint action to enhance the role of the media in combating racism and to raise awareness among journalists of the danger of community conflict.

The IFJ Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists of March 2003, on the other hand, stated that the journalist shall be alert to the danger of discrimination being furthered by media, and shall do the utmost to avoid facilitating such discriminations based on, among other things, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions, and national and social origins.

Finally, through its Declaration dated 12 February 2006, the IFJ called for media on all sides to avoid actions that might provoke community tensions both at home and abroad, underlining that the controversy over a series of cartoons commissioned and published by a Danish newspaper are deeply offensive to many Muslims, and has opened up a professional divide over questions of free expression and cultural sensitivity.

This Declaration went on to say that this is an ethical issue which must be discussed, debated and resolved by journalists.

So, the way-out is obvious to me.

The media must act responsibly when dealing with inter-religious and cross-cultural issues. As many commentators and politicians underlined, self-regulatory ethical systems should be established, or if they exist, should be strengthened.

I would like to end my remarks by referring to the recommendations of the civil society as reflected in the Summary of the Roundtable Meeting on the Representation of Muslims in Public Discourse, which the ODIHR and myself organized on 9 May 2006 in Warsaw. (You can find this document in the OSCE/ODIHR web site.)

These recommendations are the following:

1. Provide ongoing and regular training on how to report diversity-related issues in general and on Muslims and Islam in particular. Training and educational initiatives should be practical and comprehensive in scope, and targeted towards editors and practicing journalists, professors and students of journalism, and media standards bodies.

2. Take positive steps to strengthen media bodies so that they have an increased capacity to assess and regulate media quality, and particularly to develop professional codes of conduct and ethical standards for dealing with religious and cultural issues, including the rights of minorities, and the avoidance of stereotypes and language that incites prejudice, hostility and tensions.

3. Promote dialogue and cooperation between media professionals and journalists of different cultures in order to promote intercultural understanding, raise awareness of different world views and personal subjectivity in reporting, and in order to promote an exchange of best practices in responsible, ethical and quality reporting.

I would finally also like to refer to EUMC's Equal Voices magazine dated June 2006, which contains quite a number of relevant articles on freedom of expression, media responsibility and hate speech. I would especially like to direct your attention to the Article 19's recommendations, including inter alia, designing and delivering media training programs, ensuring effective ethical self regulatory codes of conduct, taking measures to ensure that their workforce is diverse and representative of society as a whole, taking care to report factually and sensitively, and ensuring that a number of voices within communities are heard, rather than representing communities as a monolithic bloc. These are very sensible suggestions.

In conclusion, let me underline that the press and especially the mass media is a most powerful tool in shaping public opinion and perception. This powerful tool must be utilized with care and a sense of civic responsibility.