



**OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting on Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Dialogue and Understanding
Almaty, 12-13 June 2006**

Opening Session

**Opening Statement by Ambassador Christian Strohal
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Chairman, Minister, Secretary-General, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, dear Colleagues,

It is a particular honor to be at this Meeting here in Kazakhstan, with its rich traditions, so relevant for our subject. This meeting follows a number of important Conferences, initiatives and decisions, making the fight against intolerance and discrimination, and for tolerance, respect and inclusion a core priority of the whole Organization. Allow me to briefly sketch some key issues emerging from these activities, from the perspective of the ODIHR.

Let me start with an underlying principle: The OSCE held six Conferences between 2003 and 2005 on anti-Semitism and on racism, discrimination and other forms of intolerance. They developed concrete commitments and at each of them it was repeatedly stressed that the fundamental aim of OSCE participating States and civil society now must move beyond “tolerating” and “integrating” other faiths and cultures.

Instead, we need to move towards understanding, appreciating, and respecting such communities and working to ensure their active engagement and participation as equal and valued members of their societies. During the OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism in Berlin in 2004, Prof Yehuda Bauer eloquently summarized the essence of this point when he said “do not tolerate me - respect, understand and appreciate me”.

Unfortunately, these wise words stand in contrast with the rise in negative and biased portrayals of different cultural and faith communities throughout the OSCE region; at the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve a strong sense of understanding and respect, as well as cooperation, between different faith, cultural and other communities.

One factor in this regard is the **impact of public discourse**. A significant number of government officials and political leaders have courageously spoken out against offensive and discriminatory portrayals of different communities; unfortunately, however, a number of them are using negative, stereotyping or prejudiced rhetoric, thus contributing to inflaming divisions and inciting prejudice and hatred.

The incidents following the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad in several OSCE states have demonstrated the link between intolerant rhetorical elements in mainstream public discourse and manifestations of violence towards groups and individuals perceived as different from the majority society. At the same time, the inexcusable violence of some of the reactions contributed further to exacerbating the situation towards real security concerns.

The threat posed by intolerant discourse and images has been acknowledged by the OSCE participating States who committed themselves to “consistently and unequivocally speak out against acts and manifestations of hate, particularly in political discourse and work in favor of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding.”

Let me make two points about **the nature of dialogue**: Events and developments throughout the OSCE region in 2006 have highlighted the need for not only dialogue between different religious, cultural and ethnic communities, but also the need for dialogue within increasingly diverse cultural, religious and ethnic communities. Events and incidents also indicate the increasing need for dialogue between cultural, faith and other communities and the public, including governmental officials, media and political leaders. Such work can only be successful if it includes promotion of political pluralism too.

Secondly, when we talk about the need for inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue we are talking, of course, of **the voice of civil society – this is paramount**. In this regard, I welcome the delivery of key note addresses by two civil society representatives. I also commend the Belgian Chairmanship and the Government of Kazakhstan, as the organizers of this meeting, for providing a prominent place within the opening session of this meeting for civil society representatives, in particular so that they present the conclusions and recommendations of yesterday's preparatory NGO Meeting. Such initiatives give recognition to the expertise and experience of civil society and should become an institutionalized practice for future OSCE conferences and meetings.

The Role of the ODIHR

The role of the ODIHR in promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, including its efforts to support participating States and civil society in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief and inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue was enhanced by the adoption of the Maastricht, Sofia and Ljubljana Ministerial Council Decisions on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination. In these Decisions, the ODIHR is tasked to implement a wide range of specific activities related to promoting tolerance and non-discrimination. Allow me to take a moment to highlight some ODIHR activities which are particularly relevant to inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue.

1. Collecting and disseminating good practices related to inter-cultural/ faith dialogue

First of all, the ODIHR is in the process of finalizing the development of an on-line information system containing information, reports and a collection of good practices in thematic areas. A dedicated website will be launched later in 2006 so as to make these good practices available both to governments and to NGOs throughout the region. I take this opportunity to call on participants of this meeting, to submit these good practices, tools and materials to my office so that they can be made publicly available. Indeed, during the last year, a large number of good practices in the field of tolerance and non-discrimination were undertaken by OSCE states and civil society. Undoubtedly, we will hear more about many of them over the next couple of days.

2. Supporting the Development of Inter-Cultural/Faith Partnerships

The ODIHR has identified more than 400 NGOs working in the area of tolerance and non-discrimination and has undertaken efforts to promote dialogue between these NGOs by organizing joint roundtable discussions and trainings in order to facilitate the exchange of good practice, transmit knowledge and experience, and to build coalitions on specific topics. The ODIHR has conducted specific outreach with NGOs dealing with discrimination against Muslims in order to identify key issues of concern for Muslim communities in the OSCE region. Last month, a roundtable meeting was held to discuss representations of Muslims in public discourse. The ODIHR will continue to provide opportunities for all NGOs working to counter racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance including against Muslims and Roma. It is of crucial importance that civil society collaborates closely to tackle common issues of intolerance as well as to identify common solutions to their common problems.

3. Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief has been one of the core commitments of the OSCE's 55 participating States since the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. Over the past 30 years, these commitments have been

considerably expanded and reaffirmed, most recently in Decisions of the OSCE Ministerial Council in 2004 and 2005. The ODIHR Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief was established to act as an advisory and consultative body to the ODIHR on issues that include education and training on international standards pertaining to freedom of religion or belief, inter-faith dialogue and conflict prevention. The Panel has also supported a number of participating States in their efforts to review their laws pertaining to freedom of religion or belief, using the ODIHR's Legislative Guidelines as a basis. You will hear more about the work of the Panel during Session 4 with the presentation of Professor Cole Durham and also at the special side event on its work. I hope that this will raise the awareness of OSCE states and civil society about the work of the Panel and encourage states to seek the advice and assistance of the Panel in efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief.

4. Education as a means to achieve inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue and understanding

Different prejudices and ignorance often serve as barriers to inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue and understanding. Education is an effective means to overcome such barriers. During the OSCE conference on Anti-Semitism in Berlin in 2004, participating States committed themselves to promote the remembrance and education about the Holocaust and to promote educational programmes to combat Anti-Semitism. Such measures were seen as necessary in order to address the root causes of anti-Semitism and contribute to a better understanding of Jewish culture and identity.

In cooperation with Anne Frank House in Amsterdam and experts from 7 OSCE countries, the ODIHR has supported the development of teaching materials on anti-Semitism, which are based on the historical and social background of each the seven countries.

The material has been translated and is now being tested in schools. Together with Yad Vashem in Israel, the ODIHR is also working with experts from 12 OSCE States to produce guidelines for educators on the

commemoration of Holocaust memorial days and guidelines to address contemporary anti-Semitism.

The ODIHR has also initiated a project on education to promote respect and diversity which will result in an assessment and overview of current educational programmes and tools for fostering respect and diversity. Recommendations to support States in their efforts to further strengthen their educational programmes will also be developed by a special group of experts dealing with diversity education.

The ODIHR looks forward to presenting the results of both of these projects at the next Tolerance Implementation Meeting on Education, which will be hosted by the government of Croatia and is scheduled for 23 and 24 October.

5. Combating racism and discrimination against Roma and Sinti

Roma and Sinti communities, together with other groups that share ethnic, linguistic and cultural ties, are subject of widespread discrimination throughout the OSCE region. The ODIHR is the primary OSCE institution responsible for reporting on the implementation of the OSCE Action Plan for Roma and Sinti as well as for providing advice to states on specific issues related to key thematic areas, including addressing socio-economic issues; improving access to education; and enhancing participation in public and political life.

6. Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism

The ODIHR intends to hold a multi-disciplinary roundtable on the prevention of violent extremism in late 2006 or early 2007. This roundtable will bring together experts from a number of different disciplines including human rights, law-enforcement, tolerance and non-discrimination and others from across the OSCE region to discuss appropriate future approaches to prevent violent extremism. In this regard, allow me to draw your attention to the ODIHR side-event on comparative approaches to the prevention of violent extremism on Tuesday.

The aim of this side-event is to demonstrate that violent extremism is a complex phenomenon that requires a multi-faceted response and further in-depth discussion.

7. Promoting Gender Equality

The ODIHR assists participating States to promote gender equality, based on the strategy of fostering a policy-dialogue with governments and civil society in order to strengthen their commitment to gender equality as a fundamental element of protecting human rights and fostering democratic development. The guiding principles of the ODIHR's work in the field of promoting gender equality are mainstreaming a gender perspective into activities, policies, projects and programmes of the Organization, promoting gender equality in participating States and supporting OSCE States in implementing relevant commitments to promote equality between women and men, including identified priorities within the OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality.

8. Institutional Cooperation

In all its activities, the ODIHR cooperates closely with its partners within the Organization and beyond. I want to highlight the exemplary cooperation with the Secretary-General, especially in the context of his initiative on the Alliance of Civilizations, and with my two colleagues and friends, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Representative on the Freedom of the Media. The ODIHR also works closely with the three Representatives of the Chairman on tolerance and non-discrimination, in order to identify common approaches and strategies in addressing intolerance and promoting inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue and partnerships. I would like to use this opportunity to thank Ms. Crickley, Ambassador Orhun and Professor Weisskirchen for their co-operation and support for the activities of my Office.

It is also important to point to the vast and rich experience and expertise of other inter-governmental organizations, especially the EU Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, and the United Nations High Commissioner for

Human Rights, in their efforts to promote inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue and understanding. I would like to thank these organizations for their ongoing collaboration and co-operation with my Office.

There is clearly a significant amount of work still to be done; however, I believe that many mechanisms, structures and tools are available to support OSCE states and civil society to continue their efforts to facilitate greater dialogue and understanding across cultural, faith and other communities throughout the OSCE region. I hope that this meeting will provide an opportunity to further highlight the activities, tools and support mechanisms that have been developed by states, civil society, specialized bodies and international organizations. I also hope that this meeting will serve to showcase the activities and work already undertaken by the OSCE, in particularly by field missions, to bring together cultures and faiths at a local level within their communities. It is often these initiatives that have the greatest impact in achieving and sustaining genuine dialogue.

I encourage all of you to come up with concrete recommendations for follow-up discussion during the Special Day on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting that will take place in Warsaw from 2 to 13 October, to which I warmly invite all of you.

In conclusion, I congratulate the Chairman-in-Office and the Government of Kazakhstan once more for organizing this important event and look forward to the Meeting to advance the implementation of existing OSCE commitments.

Thank you.