

United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 8: Human Rights Education

Especially Selected Topic

As prepared for delivery by Daniel S. Mariaschin
Public Member of the U.S. Delegation
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
October 2, 2009

Thank you, Mr. Moderator,

The OSCE has focused on education as a means to promote human rights and to increase tolerance. Indeed, the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 explicitly recognized, in principle VII on respect for human rights, “the right of the individual to know and act upon his/her rights . . .” In 2005 the Ljubljana Ministerial recognized that human rights education was “vital for the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as for the promotion of tolerance and non-discrimination.”

We support the OSCE’s efforts in this area. We continue to support the important work of the OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is providing valuable support to the government and to local communities as they work to better equip the educational system to handle the diverse needs of their students. We also commend the OSCE Office in Yerevan for its engagement in a wide range of activities aimed at raising public awareness of human rights. It supports the production of public service announcements based on the articles of the European Convention on Human Rights, the organization of conferences and workshops, the publication of information on human rights, as well as guide books on judicial reforms, alternative sentencing and monitoring places of detention. The OSCE Office in Tajikistan provides intensive training in human rights and international public law to university students.

It is important also that government officials receive training on human rights. The OSCE Mission in Montenegro has programs targeted at municipal-level civil servants, at creating human rights focal points covering all municipalities, and at providing human rights education to emerging key decision makers. The OSCE Centre in Ashgabat, in cooperation with Turkmenistan's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, has organized courses on international human rights law for civil servants and government representatives.

ODIHR’s human rights education programs include some that aim at increasing the capacity of NGOs to monitor the human rights situation in their countries in an objective and professional way. The Ljubljana Ministerial directed ODIHR to produce a compendium of best practices for OSCE member-states on human rights education and training, including the promotion of tolerance and non-discrimination. This compendium is being developed in a partnership with the Council of Europe, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNESCO. Providing a platform to share best practices is one way that the OSCE can contribute to human rights education.

While the United States has no national education curricula, we support the work of non-governmental organizations and of our individual states to promote tolerance and respect for human rights in schools throughout our country. We encourage all OSCE participating States to join us in commending both the OSCE and ODIHR for their critical work in spearheading efforts to promote human rights education across the region. For example, ODIHR's Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which includes two Americans, has issued two useful publications: "Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief" and the "Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools." The latter work promotes balanced and dispassionate teaching about different religions and is an invaluable resource for educators.

Important work on human rights education is being done also by several non-governmental American organizations. For decades, the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference Institute has provided anti-bias education and diversity training programs and resources to academic institutions, government agencies, and other sectors of society. Since 1991, the Southern Poverty Law Center has conducted a program called "Teaching Tolerance," which supports the efforts of elementary and secondary school teachers and other educators to promote respect for differences and an appreciation of diversity.

My own organization, B'nai B'rith, which is dedicated to combating anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance, has, through its various units and districts throughout the world, played a very active role in defending and promoting respect for human rights. Every year, several B'nai B'rith branches in Latin America host a seminar to educate the public about the importance of human rights; the most recent of these symposia took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina last month. In addition, B'nai B'rith International has created an education and awareness initiative called the Diverse Minds Youth Writing Challenge, which communicates a message of equality among all citizens, regardless of race, religion, national origin, gender, or sexual orientation.

Finally, ODIHR's Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department deserves praise for the crucial work it has done to raise awareness of and combat anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of intolerance. The efforts of ODIHR's Tolerance and Non-Discrimination staff experts and the OSCE Personal Representatives, as well as the ODIHR's training programs for law enforcement officials, are essential to the international fight against the varied forms of discrimination.