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STATEMENT OF THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA
Working session 2: Fundamental freedoms I, including:
Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

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In the contemporary world, in the context of development of human rights institutions, the elements of conscience and religion become even more important. These issues gradually become more urgent and pressing especially for newly independent post-Soviet countries, where democratic state and public institutions are in comparatively young stage of development.

Department of National Minorities and Religious Affairs of the Government Staff of the Republic of Armenia, which, in accordance with the law, provides expertise conclusion for the registration of the interested religious communities, has never prevented the religious groups from filing the documents for a state registration. Moreover, the process of state registration for the religious organizations is quite transparent, without unnecessary bureaucratic delays, and is performed in reasonable periods. At present, around 70 religious organizations are registered in the State Registry of the Republic of Armenia where diverse religious movements and directions are involved.

By request of the religious organization, the state body also assists the organizations to reach the agreement with the state entities on the separate issues; as well it participates as an intermediary in the process of solution of the problems and arguments between the Armenian religious organizations.

Democratic institutions and public developments dictate that certain amendments should be introduced to the laws, which have already taken place twice. However, during the recent times, the issue of reform has continued to remain urgent in the legal framework of the conscience and religious freedoms. The reason is, on one hand, an obvious public demand and necessity to regulate the newly forming relations, and on the other hand, a necessity to improve certain technical inconsistencies in the legislation. In this context, in 2009, a draft on the amendments to the current law was circulated. The Venice Commission provided a comprehensive opinion on the mentioned draft. At the end of 2010-beginning of 2011, the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia developed and circulated a new law on the religion, as well the drafts envisaging amendments to the number of other laws, which were submitted to the Venice Commission.

It should be mentioned, that in all these cases the process was organized based on the open and transparent principles of public consultations, where all interested parties were involved. At present, the public consultations are continued and the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia regulates not only all suggestions and viewpoints provided by the Armenian organizations and citizens, but also the comments and suggestions provided by the reputable international organizations.

After the Republic of Armenia became a member of the Council of Europe, the law on alternative service was adopted which specifies the types of alternative military and work service. Taking into consideration the fact, that the cases of avoiding alternative service are still being registered, it should be mentioned, that the issue remains to be at the focus of attention for the relevant state bodies. In this context, we should note, that the law is still at the stage of reforming, moreover, at present, a new draft on the amendments to the law is being circulated and the state bodies are attempting to take into account all suggestions and approaches of the interested parties during the process of law development.

The drafts have extensively been discussed by our Department and the representatives of local and international entities of Jehovah's Witnesses. It goes without doubts, that due to new reforms, the law on the alternative service will become more comprehensive and addressed. This is an indubitable demonstration, that state authorities of the Republic of Armenia are open to dialogue and take into consideration the interests of all members of the society. On the other hand, the state bodies expect that all religious communities fully realize their responsibilities and their importance to the society where they live.

Some religious organizations, in particular Jehovah's Witnesses, sometimes voice a protest to protect their rights. Such cases have always been at the focus of attention of the authorized state bodies, necessary discussions have been organized and the relevant clarifications provided. In case of violation of the law and rights, such cases were presented to the relevant state body or suggested to solve judicially. The study of such rare cases proves that, in practice, there are no foundation evidences for the violation and the situation is not adequately assessed. The considerable part of these cases relates to the facts, that the representatives of the religious organizations do not fulfill their own responsibilities or are not able to integrate into the society. As a legal and moral basis to solve this issue, the authorized state body suggested to the religious organizations Article 29 of the United National Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This fact, in turn, proves about the necessity of dialogue between religious organizations and society, which is hindered by the fact, that the religious organizations are not ready for it for a variety of reasons.

The institute of religious freedoms is one of the most significant elements of the public cohesion. In this context, the constitutionally specified issue of protecting everyone's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion has always been urgent in the Republic of Armenia. The search of ways of cooperation by joint efforts between the State and the Armenian religious communities for the society development continues to be on the agenda of the Armenian authorities. Even more, Armenia has all preconditions to establish a culture of dialogue between the state institutes and religious organizations and to overcome various public obstacles during this dialogue.

Thank you for your attention.