



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**  
**High Commissioner on National Minorities**

**OPENING ADDRESS**  
**MAX VAN DER STOEL AWARD**  
**2007**

address by  
**Knut Vollebaek**

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

**Presentation of the Max van der Stoel Award**  
**to the European Roma Rights Centre**

The Hague, the Netherlands –16 October 2007

Mr Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to "Het Spaansche Hof" and the third presentation of the Max van der Stoel Award. A special welcome to Ms. Vera Egenberger and Mr. Dzavit Berisa representing this year's awardee, the European Roma Rights Centre, and to the Foreign Minister of the Netherlands, Mr. Maxime Verhagen who will present the prize to the laureate. We are also happy to have the former prize-winners represented in the audience this evening.

I am particularly honoured to welcome my two predecessors, Minister of State Max van der Stoel and Ambassador Rolf Ekéus.

Mr. Max van der Stoel certainly needs no introduction to any of you in this room. The Award we present today is a fitting tribute to his achievements, which are too numerous to name individually in this short speech. His unrelenting commitment to peace and justice for all, as well as his unyielding efforts to protect and strengthen these values during his career spanning more than sixty years, are well known. In particular, we are grateful for the almost nine years during which he set up, shaped and developed the institution of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). Taking on the job of Europe's fireman, in a turbulent period when ethnic conflicts were flaring up throughout the OSCE region, was a daunting task indeed.

I still vividly remember working with High Commissioner van der Stoel during my term as Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE in 1999. What impressed me most was his extraordinary aptitude for identifying and addressing those areas and issues where a discreet but firm intervention with the appropriate interlocutors could make a crucial difference in promoting peace and security in Europe. The main instrument of the HCNM is the ability to establish dialogue between different groups in order to forge compromises regarding tensions involving national minority issues. This is what our mandate is all about; this is how we are able go about our task preventing inter-ethnic conflicts and providing early warning and early action on potentially destabilizing situations involving national minorities.

When Ambassador Rolf Ekéus took over as HCNM, he not only continued to employ the quiet diplomacy approach for conflict prevention but further expanded it into new geographic and thematic challenges. He took up the overwhelming task of initiating a process of reconciliation in Kosovo and he examined important new thematic areas such as the role of the police in multi-ethnic societies and the integration of so-called “new minorities”.

This is also an occasion for me to express my sincere appreciation to the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, first of all for its unwavering support for the institution of the High Commissioner from its very inception 15 years ago, and then for establishing and generously financing the Max van der Stoel Award. The Dutch Government has played a key role in the creation of the HCNM and in the drafting of its mandate, and remains to date one of its most outspoken and loyal advocates. I am very grateful for the continued support it extends to us. I would equally like to express my appreciation to the Municipality of The Hague for the welcome it provides to my office, in this city that rightfully aspires to be the legal capital of the world.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank the Members of the Jury for their participation in selecting the recipient of the Award; they are:

Ms. Helle Degn, former President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Denmark

Ms. Gay McDougall, UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, USA

Prof. Adam Daniel Rotfeld, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Poland

Prof. Ed van Thijn, Senator, the Netherlands

Dr Valeri Tishkov, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russia

I am particularly happy that Ms. Degn and Professor van Thijn are able to be present here with us this evening.

Now, without further ado, I would like to give the floor to Mr. van der Stoel himself, to share a few of his thoughts on the role of the HCNM and the continued importance of working to prevent ethnic conflicts.