



United States Mission to the OSCE

Situation in Baltimore, Maryland

As delivered by Charge d'Affaires Kate Byrnes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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Many of us have watched the recent events unfolding in Baltimore. Local residents, clergy, civil rights advocates, and other community leaders have raised legitimate concerns in the wake of the death of Freddie Gray after an encounter with Baltimore police. The U.S. Department of Justice is working with local law enforcement, city officials, and community members to address these concerns. The details of this tragic case remain to be determined.

The Department of Justice has officially opened an independent investigation into this matter and is gathering information to determine whether any prosecutable civil rights violations occurred. The Department will continue its careful and deliberate examination of the facts in the coming days and weeks. The Department's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services also has been conducting a full and collaborative review of the Baltimore City Police Department. And the Department's Community Relations Service has been on the ground in Baltimore communicating and coordinating with community groups and leaders, as well as government officials. Attorney General Lynch pledged that the Department of Justice will continue to provide any assistance that might be helpful.

Attorney General Lynch "condemn[ed] in the strongest terms the senseless acts of violence by some individuals in Baltimore that have resulted in harm to law enforcement officers, destruction of property and a shattering of the peace in the city of Baltimore. Those who commit violent actions, ostensibly in protest of the death of Freddie Gray, do a disservice to his family, to his loved ones, and to legitimate peaceful protestors who are working to improve their community for all its residents."

President Obama commented: "I think we, as a country, have to do some soul searching. This is not new. It's been going on for decades. And without making any excuses for criminal activities that take place in these communities, what we also know is that if you have impoverished communities that have been stripped away of opportunity, where children are born into abject poverty...in those environments, if we think that we're just going to send the police to do the dirty work of containing the problems that arise there without -- as a nation and as a society -- saying what can we do to change those communities, to help lift up those communities, and give those kids opportunity, then we're not going to solve this problem."

The events in Baltimore have once again turned our attention to the issue of policing in the United States. In December 2014, the President signed an executive order establishing a Task Force on 21st Century Policing to strengthen community policing and strengthen trust among law enforcement officers and the communities they serve. The task force released an initial report in March, which offered pragmatic ideas based on input from criminal justice experts, community leaders, law enforcement, and civil liberties advocates.

Recently, President Obama observed that the task force's constructive proposals, if adopted by local communities, states, and law enforcement generally, would make a difference. These proposals would help the overwhelming majority of effective, honest and fair law enforcement officers do their job better by removing or retraining the handful who are not performing in this manner. The President acknowledged that these proposals would not solve every problem, but would make a concrete difference in rebuilding trust between police and the communities that they serve.

Despite the challenges we face in the United States regarding policing and the application of our laws – and because of them – the United States continues to believe that respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, tolerance, and the rule of law are the underpinnings of a strong democratic nation, we will always strive to fulfill our OSCE commitments to the highest possible standard.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.