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PERMANENT DELEGATION OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE

HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING WORKINS SESSION 5: TOLERANCE AND NON-DISCRIMINATION NATIONAL MINORITIES

Statement by Deputy Director General Dag Malmer Halvorsen
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Warsaw, 1 October 2008

Thank you Mr. Moderator, ladies and gentlemen

The existence of sizable national minorities is the rule rather than the exception in our societies. Whatever their background, national minorities enrich the societies where they live in various ways. But minorities can also be a source of conflict, and that is why the institution of High Commissioner on National Minorities is so important, with his mandate for protection of human rights and early warning of possible emerging conflicts, as well as conflict prevention and conflict resolution.

As pointed out in my delegation's opening statement, national minorities can even be a source of conflicts between states, and we would therefore in particular like to commend the institution of High Commissioner for the very worthwhile efforts laid down in compiling and developing a set of *Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations*. Norway firmly believes that these recommendations will be of great importance in the promotion of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities and in improving trust and cooperation between the States belonging to this organisation.

Mr. Moderator,

In a press statement released shortly after his recent visit to Georgia, the High Commissioner on National Minorities stated that "*international norms and standards require that any authority exercising jurisdiction over population and territory, even if not recognized by the international community, must respect the human rights of everyone, including those of persons belonging to national minorities. Whoever controls South Ossetia and Abkhazia must respect the rights of ethnic Georgians resident there and must allow those who had been forced to leave the two regions to return to their former places of residence.*"

We agree with this statement, and in this context we would like to underline the need for the High Commissioner to have free, unrestricted and unconditional access to South Ossetia in order to inter alia assess the situation in the region.

Mr. Moderator,

As has been mentioned already, a conference was held in Oslo to mark the tenth anniversary the Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities. Denial of linguistic rights can be a violation of the right to live without discrimination, an infringement of the right to freedom of expression and a denial of the right to freedom of religion.

But just as language can be a tool of suppression, it is also an essential source of empowerment – intertwined as it is with culture, traditions, history, identity and self-respect. The Oslo Recommendations are based on the conviction that self-respect and knowledge of history and cultural inheritance is an essential building block for integration.

The Recommendations strike a balance between the right to retain a minority language and the need to master the official language of the country in question. For this to work, the minority should be prepared to learn and use the official language, normally the language of the majority. At the same time, the majority must accept the linguistic rights of persons belonging to minorities.

In closing Mr. Moderator, we assure the High Commissioner of our strong support for his office in protecting minority interest and defusing potential conflict situations related to minority issues across the OSCE region, and we will continue our close cooperation with Ambassador Vollebæk and his dedicated and competent staff

Thank you