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Delegation of Belarus

**STATEMENT BY THE DELEGATION OF BELARUS AT THE
OSCE HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON TOLERANCE AND
NON-DISCRIMINATION**

Astana, 29 June 2010

**Plenary session 3: Combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, also
focusing on intolerance and discrimination against Christians and
members of other religions**

Ladies and gentlemen,

The problem under discussion today has two aspects for the Republic of Belarus – the internal and the external.

As far as the internal aspect is concerned there are no clashes or conflicts of an ethnic, racial, linguistic or religious nature in Belarus.

The absence of inter-ethnic and interconfessional tension in Belarusian society, which could result in inter-ethnic and interreligious conflicts, has already been noted on a number of occasions by the OSCE and other international organizations.

This situation can be explained by the competent and effective nationalities policy pursued by the Belarusian State. We might mention that more than 140 peoples and nationalities live in our country, and 81 per cent of citizens class themselves as belonging to the titular ethnic group and only 19 per cent as belonging to other ethnic entities. This testifies to the fact that regardless of the number of representatives all the ethnic groups enjoy equal rights with the titular ethnic group.

As for religion, 25 confessions and denominations and 3,263 religious organizations are represented in Belarus.

The dominant confession, however, is Orthodoxy, with whom 81.7 per cent of the country's citizens identify.

The absence of manifestations of intolerance in Belarusian society is also connected with specific characteristics inherent in the mentality of the country's citizens, the historic traditions of peaceful inter-ethnic interaction, and long-standing and enduring ties between the ethnic groups living on the territory of Belarus.

The specific nature of our historic development has resulted in a lifelong immunity on the part of the Belarusian people to all forms of discrimination. Orthodoxy has in fact created in the spiritual world of the Belarusian people mechanisms that have made it possible to preserve the feeling of one's own dignity and internal freedom in the face of an extreme lack of external freedoms. The cultural archetype of the Belarusian people, formed under the influence of Orthodoxy, also lies at the heart of the State strategy to achieve civil peace and harmony in society.

Many in this room agree that discrimination and xenophobia cannot be defeated by incantations alone. Ethnic and religious harmony is achieved only through the practice of respectful co-operation and a dialogue of cultures.

In this context, for the citizens of Belarus – and this means Russians, Tatars, Jews, Ukrainians and other groups – it is not clear why artificial barriers and restrictions are being created for them in the OSCE region. I am referring to the cost of a Schengen visa, which is twice as expensive for the citizens of Belarus as for our neighbours – Ukraine and Russia.

Our country does not create problems for other States: we are not telling anyone else how to live, we have no claims to foreign territory, we do not force anyone to choose anything against their will, and so on. For the ordinary citizens of our country, therefore, the decision adopted by the political elites and the political institutions of Europe, guided by their political interests and goals, is discriminatory. They hope that this restriction will be lifted. Here it is very important that the declarations and emotional words about commitment to the values of tolerance and non-discrimination on the part of the European political elite should be accompanied by real steps to create real conditions to rule out any manifestations of intolerance in the OSCE region.

Thank you for your attention.