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Freedom of religion or belief

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Mr. Moderator,
Distinguish delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Since gaining independence in 1991, the Republic of Armenia has expressed firm commitment to guarantee, within the framework of the overall democratization of the society, freedom of thought and conscience and made significant steps to that end, particularly, toward prevention of any kind of discrimination based on religion and belief. Hence, the legislation and governmental policies of the newly independent republic were gradually but steadily brought into conformity with relevant international instruments, in particular, with the requirements and provisions of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion and Belief. The legal system of the state provides for a wide framework of laws and regulations ensuring complete enjoyment of relevant freedoms.

The adoption of constitutional amendments in a referendum held on November 2005 paved the way toward increasing the impartiality of judiciary. The respective articles of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia defining human rights and rights of national minorities and religious groups were amended. In particular, Article 14.1 established equality of all before the law.

The “Law on freedom of conscience and religious associations”, adopted in 1991 which is still in force gives the opportunity for both national minorities and religious communities to practice their national or other religion, to establish religious associations. For the time being 66 religious organizations, which represent 13 religious movements, are registered in the Register of legal entities of the Ministry of Justice.

Another important step was the creation of the Department for National Minorities and Religious Affairs of the Government. The Department conducts monitoring of mass media in order to track any racist or xenophobic concepts, discrimination against any religion or its followers, information stimulating violence or hate.

At present, the process of returning the buildings, which belonged to religious communities, but were nationalized during the Soviet time, is underway.

Mr. Moderator,

The Government of Armenia pays special attention to the issue of raising public awareness. In this connection I would like to mention that a book entitled: “Freedom of conscience, religion and belief (rights, opportunities, responsibilities)” was published in order to familiarize the population of Armenia with the laws and other legal acts related to the freedom of religion and conscience, as well as with relevant international documents.

Among legal acts guaranteeing freedom of conscience, religion and belief and regulating the activity of religious organizations, the Law of the Republic of Armenia on “Alternative service” plays a significant role. According to this law the alternative service is a special state service carried out by conscientious objectors. Thus, the military service is being replaced by a civilian service for the duration of time equivalent to the military service. The Department of National Minorities and Religious Affairs of the Government of Armenia regularly monitors the places of alternative service and confirms the fact of normal working conditions, as well as good relationships between civil servants. Currently, certain issues persist with the Jehovah’s Witnesses which the Government is working to address.

Mr. Moderator,

Religions and other beliefs bring hope and consolation to billions of people, and hold great potential for peace and reconciliation. However, they have also been a source of tension and conflict. This complexity, and the difficulty of defining “religion” and “belief,” are illustrated by the still developing history of the protection of freedom of religion or belief in the context of international human rights.

Thank you.