



**PERMANENT DELEGATION
OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE**

**OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP CONFERENCE ON INTOLERANCE AND
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS
9 -10 OCTOBER 2007, CORDOBA**

Session 1

**STATEMENT BY THE NORWEGIAN AMBASSADOR
AND PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE TO THE OSCE
MR. GUTTORM VIK**

(Full text)

Mr Chairman,

Let me first thank the Spanish chairmanship of the OSCE – and at the same time our gracious host at this meeting - for the initiatives and the leadership it has shown on the increasing problems related to intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. It is indeed fitting that this conference takes place in beautiful and historic Cordoba - for many centuries an important meeting place and a venue for largely peaceful coexistence between Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

It is highly important and appropriate for the OSCE to pursue its important task of promoting tolerance and fighting against discrimination of Muslims, as well as any other discrimination based on faith or belief. Let me in this context pay a special tribute to the three special representatives of the Chairman-in Office, Ms Anastasia Crickley, Ambassador Ömür Orhun and Mr. Gert Weisskirchen for their tireless efforts in combating all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. Both this conference and the previous conferences held here in Cordoba in 2005 and in Bucharest earlier this year contribute to increase the focus on the challenges we are facing. Our hope is that we will also be able to make significant progress on this important theme.

Mr. Chairman,

Globalisation means that people from different cultures and religions meet. It means that different traditions and values are exposed to each other and that people have to learn to live - peacefully – together, in relationships defined by mutual tolerance and respect. The coexistence of different cultures and religions within a society leads to challenges – but also provides us with opportunities.

I would like to emphasise one point: It is not religions that meet. It is people. It is not, therefore, religion in itself that is the problem. It is intolerance, exclusion of others, discrimination, prejudices and xenophobia that we must stand up against.

Many speak as if there is an ongoing conflict between what is named the “Muslim” and the “Western” world. We do not think there is such a conflict, nor do we think these are the right terms to use. The discourse has been polarized and too often dominated by extreme elements. This approach prevents us from engaging in fruitful discussions, making it more difficult to find middle ground. Constructive dialogues must necessarily involve people and communities from different segments of society. Education at all levels is essential to promote greater tolerance.

All religions are potential bearers of peace, reconciliation and reflection. People must utilise this potential. People live in a political context. It is human beings who are responsible for bringing about hatred, fear and violence. It is also human beings who are responsible for bringing about peace and prosperity.

Unfortunately, religious and cultural identity has often been abused to define the different sides in conflict situations. In recent years, we have seen how religion has been used to promote and deepen several conflicts, both violent and non-violent. In most cases, the conflicts are really power struggles over political issues, rather than clashes based on religious differences.

Religion and culture can also play quite a different role. Religious and cultural leaders have stood up against wars and the use of violence. Religious and cultural leaders, as well as non-governmental organisations, can play important roles in enhancing tolerance and promoting respect for religious and cultural diversity. They can make valuable contributions to peace and justice. In more secular societies there is often a tendency to underestimate this potential. It is therefore encouraging that national governments, the UN and the OSCE (to mention some), seek to involve these communities in order to better understand and deal with the role of religion and culture in national and international politics.

Mr. Chairman,

Norway believes in the potential of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Through dialogue we can enhance mutual understanding and promote tolerance and non-discrimination. Dialogue can have a considerable impact. Entering into dialogue does not necessarily mean giving up on fundamental values and principles. It represents a possibility to seize the middle ground, and to challenge the dominance of the extremes.

Let me give an example: To many in my country, it was a big surprise that people of the Muslim faith could react so strongly to cartoons of the prophet Mohammed which were printed in some Danish and subsequently also Norwegian media at the beginning of 2006. And vice versa, many Muslims could not understand how anyone could commit such an outrageous act as to print the cartoons. Apparently, the principle of freedom of expression, which is so fundamental in our democracies, and which also is liberally exercised in relation to religion, ran counter to religious beliefs and strongly held feelings.

Quickly the debate turned towards the dangerous dichotomy of "us and them" – we and the others. But then we learned that this polarisation was not only located to countries far away. It was unfolding in the midst of our own society.

Norwegians of the Muslim faith – many of them born in Norway – stood up and said that they too felt deeply insulted. In our own language, with reference to our own cultural code, they explained their feelings.

That made us ask: How do we handle this? Should the images not have been printed? And if not, why not? And either way – what is really at stake here?

At the height of the controversy, we discovered that an important channel of dialogue already existed. Two religious organisations – the Islamic Council and the Church Council of Ecumenical and International Relations - sat down together to address the issue. Their purpose was not to agree, since it makes little sense to seek to agree on the value of one faith versus another. But they could agree to respect and protect each others' values. They sought to understand and to find out how to manage differences, how to be sensitive to the deeply held beliefs of others.

The dialogue had a considerable impact, and contributed to reduce tensions and calm the situation..

Today, we have established a forum under the aegis of our Ministry of Foreign Affairs where religious leaders, academics and diplomats meet to discuss important issues related to religion and foreign policy. It is a very valuable arena, for the Ministry, the religious communities, the non-governmental organisations and the research institutions alike.

Another response to the cartoon controversy has been the joint efforts of Norway and Indonesia to promote a Global Inter-Media Dialogue. This dialogue focuses on freedom of expression and the media's role in a globalised world. It is a forum where leading media representatives from different continents, countries and cultures can discuss ways and means of promoting freedom of expression and greater tolerance. Many of the participants are from OSCE countries such as Albania, Azerbaijan, Denmark, France, Germany, Russia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The dialogue provides a forum for exchange of information, networking and cooperation between Western media and media in predominantly Muslim countries.

Although dialogue is the most important path to greater tolerance, respect for diversity and common understanding, dialogue is rarely without obstacles. Dialogue may also challenge decision-makers and religious leaders. Respect, acceptance and appreciation of cultures, traditions and religions must be mutual in order for dialogue to take place. Without fundamental respect for differences and recognition of the human dignity of the other, there can be no true dialogue. Basically, this means that we must be willing to both talk and listen. We must acknowledge that our dialogue partner has insights, convictions, values and abilities that could potentially make us reconsider our position. Fundamental respect for diversity is indeed a prerequisite for dialogue, and conversely, increased respect for differences will hopefully also be a result of the dialogue.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.