



**Intervention by the Permanent Delegation of Sweden at the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Religion or Belief
Vienna 9-10 July 2009**

Mr/Madam Chairperson, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sweden would like to thank the Greek Chairmanship for organizing this Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting together with the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The topic at hand – Freedom of religion or belief – is not only a very important human right and fundamental freedom in itself but also closely linked to other relevant fundamental freedoms such as the freedoms of expression, assembly and association.

That everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is, in Sweden, held to be a self-evident truth. It has not however, always been like that. Mass emigration in the 19th Century bears witness to the trauma of not being allowed to belong to the congregation of one's choice.

In today's democratic Sweden, freedom of religion is given absolute protection by the Constitution and cannot be restricted. Freedom of religion includes the freedom to hold certain religious beliefs, to practice a religion or to practice no religion. The manifestation of the freedom of religion, for example through disseminating information, taking part in religious preaching or forming and participating in religious associations, is protected by other human rights and fundamental freedoms such as the right to freedom of expression and assembly.

The exercise of these rights may be subject only to such restrictions as are prescribed by law and are consistent with international standards.

Other relevant legal provisions can be found in, for example the Criminal Code, according to which it is a criminal offence to interfere or attempt to prevent public worship, public practice, marriage, funeral and similar duty. Nevertheless, the exercise of such religious practices or rites may be limited by law to protect the human rights and freedoms of others. Furthermore a criminal act is not protected just because it has religious motives. It is, however, fundamental that no limitation is discriminatory and singles out particular religions or beliefs.

Mr/Madam Chairperson,

My government is fully committed to ensure that Sweden meets the demands of a multicultural society, where everyone regardless of gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnic, linguistic or religious affiliation is guaranteed equal value, and where her dignity and freedom

is not violated. In practice this is an everyday struggle, but through a democratic system which assumes that we are different and allows us to be so, we continue to work to achieve this aim.

My government is further committed, together with partners in the EU and OSCE, to defend the right to freedom of religion or belief internationally, be it by reacting against violations, supporting human rights defenders or working together to enhance the protection of the right worldwide.

During the last few years the debate regarding freedom of religion has intensified - with far-reaching political and economic consequences - including tragic acts of violence and deplorable harassment of individuals. This clearly demonstrates the link between respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms on the one hand and security on the other. Once again we are reminded of the crucial need for a comprehensive security agenda.

Mr/Madam Chairperson,

Dialogue across national, regional or religious borders is essential to promote mutual understanding and respect. Only through dialogue can there be tolerance between various believers and non-believers.

In this regard, the role of civil society cannot be stressed enough. Religious communities all over the OSCE region play an important part in civil society and their representatives are in many cases also active human rights defenders. At the same time - even in the OSCE-region - it still happens that governments oppress civil society and that those expressing criticism or their beliefs are silenced. This can never be accepted.

The link between freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression should be particularly highlighted. You cannot enjoy freedom of religion or belief without the fundamental freedom to receive information or express an opinion. Governments' restrictions of the internet is an example of unacceptable violations of the freedom of expression and also, in effect, a means to restrict people's possibility to exercise their freedom of religion or belief.

Mr/Madam Chairperson,

Let me conclude by reiterating Sweden's appreciation for the work done by the ODIHR and its Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion and Belief. We have taken particular note of the useful Toledo Principles on religious education as well as other high quality recommendations provided during the years. We encourage all participating States to make use of the assistance and recommendations provided by ODIHR and the Advisory Panel. Today I would particularly like to express my appreciation for the valuable recommendations presented by the speaker from the Civil Society Roundtable, and reiterate my hope that the upcoming meeting will provide for interesting discussions.

Thank you.