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

Astana, 29 and 30 June 2010

**Plenary session 7: Strategies for promoting tolerance and  
understanding, inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue, including its  
religious dimension, in the OSCE area**

**Italian initiatives in defence of religious minorities at the international level**

The defence of freedom of religion and of worship and the protection of persons belonging to religious minorities, including Christian minorities in particular, everywhere in the world are important priorities for Italian foreign policy in the human rights field.

Italy raises its voice, both at the bilateral and at the multilateral level, in defence of these basic rights whenever they are threatened or violated. Such advocacy work by Italy led to the adoption of ad hoc conclusions on freedom of religion by the General Affairs and External Relations Council of the European Union on 16 November 2009.

With this text, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the 27 countries have reaffirmed their strong commitment to the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief, a freedom closely linked to freedom of expression, and have expressed their alarm at reports of frequent and increasing acts of extreme violence against persons belonging to religious minorities. The Council has also decided to initiate an internal exercise to evaluate the tools available to the European Union for countering religious intolerance. Consideration of the issue is being continued by the European Union Working Group on Human Rights which, in February 2010, endorsed the relevant Italian proposals: strengthening of action at bilateral and multilateral levels; increased attention given to identifying financial resources (using the financial instrument constituted by the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)); creation of a working tool for the European Union heads of missions.

Mention should also be made of the action taken by Italy, together with its European Union partners, in the United Nations, with the submission of the resolution on religious intolerance adopted at the 64th session of the General Assembly. This is a document of great political importance, as it tackles the problem of religious intolerance in an organic manner. Above all, the European Union succeeded in taking into account the various concerns of its members in a common text that was approved by the General Assembly by consensus.

As far as the content is concerned, the resolution gives pride of place to a strong condemnation of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, and notes the rise in instances of intolerance directed against religious communities around the world, including Christian communities.

In addition, Italy, along with the European Union, participated in the negotiations leading to the resolution on extending the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion adopted at the session of the Human Rights Council held in Geneva from 31 May to 18 June 2010. The Special Rapporteurs represent one of the most important instruments created by the United Nations system for the defence of human rights. In this particular instance, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, an independent expert, visits the Member States of the United Nations, draws up reports containing recommendations to States for improving the protection of religious freedom throughout the world, and can issue statements or communiqués with regard to occurrences or situations that give rise to concern. Italy, together with the European Union, made great efforts in Geneva to maintain the operational independence and the specific characteristics of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion: these efforts were crowned with success when the relevant resolution was adopted in Geneva by consensus on 18 June.

Lastly, in the autumn of this year, Italy and the European Union will submit the customary document on combating religious intolerance to the United Nations General Assembly, in the interests of ensuring that the international community continues to pay close attention to the topic through the adoption of the usual resolution on the matter.