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Keynote speech
OSCE HDIM
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Excellencies, and colleagues, Chairman,

I am grateful for the opportunity to address you at the beginning of the 2007 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of the OSCE.

The Human Dimension Implementation Meeting is generally considered to be the main annual human rights event in the Euro-Atlantic region.

I would like to start, ladies and gentlemen, by placing this meeting in a historical context. Over thirty years ago our leaders began a process by which Helsinki signatory states could hold one another accountable for adhering to common security and human rights commitments, and where citizens could report on their analyses.

The real origins of the Helsinki Process are in fact much deeper in our history, and are found at the beginnings of the human rights tradition. But no other group of nations on Earth has ever gone farther than the Helsinki signatory states to pledge fidelity to fundamental human rights principles, and in doing so to contribute to mankind's march toward emancipation, toward freedom, toward democracy, toward civil society—indeed, toward bringing political practices in line with the moral obligations of our civilization, and in fact, with the demands of human nature.

The Helsinki Process is not a bureaucratic exercise. As a former intellectual and student of cultural anthropology, I see this meeting as an international political ritual where our commitments to fundamental principles are measured against reality. The HDIM is a confrontation between the words and rhetoric generated in diplomatic debates, and the immediate, concrete impact of what happens in the real world. The sinners are called upon to repent. We are all sinners; yet we are all part of an interdependent community of peoples and nations, dedicated to one another. But the days are over when transgressions of common human rights standards can credibly be regarded as “internal matters”. Today, human rights problems anywhere are matters of legitimate international concern. They are threats to human security, the security of a humanity, ultimately, without borders.

The Helsinki Accords and Follow-Up Documents represent the highest level ever reached of committing governments to the universality of human rights and the political means to implement it. I have been working on problems of political reform and human rights in this region since 1991. Let me tell you why the word “Helsinki” has become emblematic of the hopes and dreams of the people to whom you, as high government officials, are

responsible. And why we must not squander this precious legacy of commitments it is our duty to honor.

First of all, “Helsinki” means peace. It means finding peaceful solutions to internal and cross-border disputes, a commitment to dialogue and to negotiations instead of using military force and violence. “Helsinki” means the Rule of Law. To citizens the Rule of Law primarily means that governments should be constrained by parliaments and courts to act within the law. For citizens this means freedom from fear, and confidence in state institutions.

For your fellow citizens, “Helsinki” means--in plain language--treating them with common human decency. Perhaps you do not often find those words in the cloud of technical and legalistic language that dominates this field, but isn't this what it is all about? When we speak about respecting basic human rights and freedoms, we are speaking about acting in accordance with moral principles, especially those that command us to treat others with respect and dignity, in fact, treating others as we would wish to be treated, which is the core principle that unites the main ethical and humanistic traditions found in our societies—the traditions, indeed, that are the ultimate basis for the OSCE commitments.

Respected colleagues, we are at a crucial point in the history of this organization devoted to implementing the Helsinki principles that have been a historic step toward peace and respect for human dignity. What will we do? How seriously will we take our responsibilities? How will succeeding generations judge us? Does it matter if we turn our backs on human rights?

We in the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights are concerned because so many people in OSCE participating States have no opportunity to make free political choices in democratic elections. Instead we see bogus or Potemkin-village style elections that resemble those organized in the Soviet Union. Some leaders seem afraid of democracy. They assert that so-called stability is more important than democracy, but it is clear to any objective observer that violations of democratic principles are not only rejections of international standards and law; they are simply impractical if we are concerned about stability and security. In this day and age, people denied democracy will be restless and might seek power violently if democracy is thwarted because of short-sighted political expediency. There is nothing stable about vertical power arrangements, authoritarianism, and dictatorship. Pluralism will always exist. To recognize it is the stable and secure approach.

Restrictions on the flow of information and opinion do not contribute to stability and security, either. What they do is create societies full of rumors, fantasies and fear. They dramatically reduce the possibility of citizens working with governments to solve social problems and to develop politically, intellectually, and spiritually. Corruption and waste thrive in the darkness, and so do violations of social and economic rights. How can we imagine to address all the problems of the poor, the elderly, the infirm, if there is no transparency?

The liberalization of policies regarding minority religions that began in the 1990s seems to have largely stopped and new laws pose serious restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion. Now, and especially when it comes to Muslim activities, such restrictions are often justified by “national security.” But religious minority groups appear to be generally perceived as threats on grounds that are difficult to comprehend, while the loyalty of some mainstream religious communities is bought through protecting their traditionally privileged status, their market share of believers.

Participating States are waffeling on questions like torture, arbitrary detention, the right to counsel, and extradition. These policies deprive our societies of what can be one of the most powerful shields against terrorism: commitment to human rights.

We are concerned because civil society and in particular, the human rights communities that are the voice of the vulnerable are being persecuted in numerous participating States and in danger of being squeezed out of the OSCE.

It is not a good thing when members of governing or ruling elites are isolated and have little information and understanding about what is happening in their own societies, and live within the confines of a hermetic ideological reality system.

The greatest potential of the HDIM lies in the opportunity to listen to civil society, and listen with an open mind. That means not to *a priori* classify appeals about human rights problems as political attacks, hiding behind the so-called war on terrorism or trumped-up national antagonisms to discredit anyone with a critical point.

Reports from civil society or from other governments about human rights problems should not be dismissed, they should be followed up. They should be investigated if only because they may signal suffering that can snowball into a security problem—for you. Any participating State acknowledging a human rights problem can get plenty of help solving it, and can get plenty of understanding and cooperation. Let us work together.

The OSCE institutions should not be deprived of their potential to assist participating States hold free and fair elections, to work toward the goal of independent courts, and strengthen democratic developments. Too many questions that have real impact on people’s lives aren’t being addressed because of pointless politicization.

I am appealing to you, on behalf of all the human rights communities in the region, not to turn away from the ideas and goals that built this organization, made it exceptional, and that connect it to the human rights tradition.

Thank you for your attention.