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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Combating Discrimination Based on Color

As prepared for delivery by Secretary of Housing and Development
Alphonso Jackson
to the OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight Against Racism,
Xenophobia and Discrimination, Brussels
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Mr. Moderator:

Up until 40 years ago, being a black American meant something far different than it means today. We did not eat in the same restaurants where white families ate. We used the back entrance at the movie theater and sat in the balcony. We could be passed over for a job solely on the basis of our skin color. We drank from separate water fountains... and sat at the back of the bus.

But 40 years ago, the United States government enacted landmark legislation called the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Act outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin. It profoundly changed our nation, and in particular, the lives of black Americans. In the four decades since, Americans of color have made tremendous strides.

Consider that in 1964, only 26 percent of black Americans over the age of 25 had a high school diploma. By 2003, that had risen to 80 percent. Blacks faced a poverty rate of nearly 42 percent in 1964... but that had dropped to just under 24 percent in 2002.

Without question, black Americans – and *all* Americans of color – are participating in our democracy with greater equality than ever before.

I do not mean to suggest that we have rid the U.S. of racial discrimination. It will take more than 40 years to heal two centuries of racial division, and so the fight against discrimination remains an ongoing battle – a *daily* struggle in some communities. Americans of color often find themselves living in areas of high crime. We do not always have access to the same standard of health care enjoyed by whites... or the same educational opportunities. We are far less likely to own a home.

The federal government continues to fight these injustices, supported by a series of civil rights laws enacted by Congress in the years following the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Today, we also protect an individual's right to vote...

their right to live in housing free of discrimination... their right to attend segregation-free schools... their right to equal employment opportunities.

The Administration of President George W. Bush has taken an active role in both prosecuting violations of federal civil rights laws, and in strengthening the protections against racial discrimination.

Ours was the first U.S. Administration to call for an end to racial profiling in federal law enforcement. Racial profiling is the practice of targeting black Americans for supposed traffic violations in the belief that blacks are more likely to be involved in criminal activities. We have now put into place specific guidelines prohibiting the practice.

We are working to end racial discrimination in the delivery of health care services, and have developed a blueprint to end these disparities for everyone in the U.S. by the year 2010.

The President's historic educational reform initiative – called “No Child Left Behind” – addresses many of the obstacles that prevent minority students from receiving a high-quality education. For the first time, the federal government is demanding that schools close the achievement gap between black and white students.

The agency I lead – the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development – is working to increase the public's awareness of fair housing laws that prevent discrimination in leasing, renting, and lending. The Department of Justice brings lawsuits where there is a pattern or practice of discrimination.

Countries across the globe struggle with many of these same injustices. I have lived outside of the U.S. and traveled throughout many nations, and I have seen abuses committed openly that my government first took steps to end 40 years ago. In some European and African nations, a person's skin color on the day of their birth determines their place in society for their entire life. In other countries, victims of discrimination face structural barriers that make it difficult to pursue civil actions against those who discriminate.

But I have been encouraged by the progress detailed at this Conference. As a result of actions being taken in the U.S., I can imagine a day in the not-so-distant future when discrimination against people of color is a rare occurrence in my country. Through the efforts of the OSCE nations gathered here this week, we have reason to be hopeful that such a day is within reach of us *all*.