

OSCE Conference on anti-Semitism and on other forms of intolerance

Session 4

Fighting intolerance and discrimination against Muslims: facilitating integration and respecting cultural diversity

Statement by Mr. Piet de Klerk, Human Rights Ambassador, the Netherlands

Here in Spain “3/11” is one of those dates that stick in people’s minds. Similarly the date of 2 November (2004) is etched in Dutch consciousness as the date that film maker Theo van Gogh, a person who was critical about Muslims and Islam, was murdered. Seen from afar, a more small-scale crime than the explosions that rocked Madrid in March, but one that raised many questions in the Netherlands about the multicultural society, integration and radicalisation given that it was a murder with a religious dimension.

The dilemma, as Minister Bot said to the Commission on Human Rights in March, “is how to protect ourselves from intolerance without becoming intolerant ourselves. In other words, what measures should a government take to protect its citizens from religious extremism, while at the same time preserving everything that makes for an open and democratic society?”

In the months after 2 November many violent incidents took place: threats and arson being the most frequent crimes. About 60 percent of those incidents had an anti-Muslim character. The Netherlands government has taken a strong stand against these discriminatory acts. In addition the government has reacted with a set of proposals to strengthen social cohesion. In November last year, it launched its Broad Initiative on Social Cohesion. Its objective is to stimulate, support and positively publicise actions and initiatives on the part of municipalities, social and religious organisations and citizens that are aimed at enhancing social ties and involvement.

Thereby the government reacted to the concerns expressed by the population – fears about the way different ethnic groups in Dutch society interact with each other and about the impact of individualisation, secularisation and globalisation on Dutch social life. And it tried to build on initiatives, which citizens and organisations were already launching.

In a meeting of Cabinet Members with civil society and local authorities on 26 January, a range of action points was formulated to promote dialogue and social inclusion. Several areas of concern were addressed, such as the employment market, education, youth in the

neighbourhood, safety and tolerance in the immediate living environment and participation of ethnic minorities in public life. To highlight just one example relevant for the Muslim community is the action to include more parents of ethnic origin in parents' organisations, which are involved in education policy and the establishment of a teachers' association in Islamic schools. Proposals were included for the promotion of inter-ethnic and inter-religious debate and dialogue at local levels. For example in Rotterdam the City Council has launched a series of debates on Islam in co-operation with Islamic organisations, students' associations and others.

In a separate meeting Prime Minister Balkenende and Minister for Immigration and Integration Verdonk met with organisations based on religion or belief. Muslim organisations have also participated in this meeting. It was the first time that such a diverse array of religious organisations (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) met with each other and with the government. This meeting was the beginning of a dialogue that must continue.

This development to promote debate and dialogue in Dutch society is not entirely new. The Steering Group Islam and Citizenship founded in 1996, has played its role in engaging in the social debate within the Muslim communities, broadening it, where relevant, for Dutch society at large.

Two Islamic umbrella organisations were officially recognised by the Dutch Government in 2004 in order to promote a dialogue between the Government and the Islamic communities in the Netherlands. This recognition entails regular meetings with the Minister of Immigration and Integration, consultation on major policy initiatives and the possibility of being awarded the status of official organisation for spiritual counselling in judicial institutions and in the army.

The Dutch government has elaborated a policy paper aimed at preventing isolation and enhancing social inclusion of young Muslims. This policy paper was prepared in co-operation with Forum, an Institute for Multicultural Development, which functions as an expertise centre for migrant communities in the Netherlands. Three approaches or action lines can be distinguished in this programme:

- Indicating options for combining the practice of Islam with life in western society
- Expanding knowledge of professionals such as teachers and social workers dealing with young people with feelings of disappointment and exclusion
- Strengthening the social connections among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. Active participation in public life and not just inside the individual's circle may prevent the emergence of small social units who turn their backs on society seeking isolation.

In conclusion: this session is on facilitating integration and respecting cultural diversity. Both are important tenets of Netherlands policy. Integration is a common responsibility. Integration is a two way street. That will remain. More than before, Dutch policy is aimed at ensuring that traffic is moving in that street; that there is no stagnation. Integration has to be a dynamic process and needs more than a "laissez faire" policy.