



Tolerance Implementation Meeting

Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Understanding

Almaty, 12-13 June 2006

*Opening remarks by Pierre Chevalier, Special Envoy of the OSCE
Chairman-in-Office*

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding is not a remote or abstract goal but a fact of life. Fruitful exchanges between people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs, and mutual respect and even admiration are a historic reality.

The region where we find ourselves today, Central Asia, is a prime example of this, for it has acted as a crossroads for the movement of people, goods, and - most importantly - ideas between Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia for centuries. Many intellectual and artistic influences originated and transited here: Hellenistic, Iranian, Indian and Chinese influences were able to intermix in Central Asia. Greco-Buddhist art represents one of the most vivid examples of this interaction. Many

innovations from the East filtered into Europe during the High Middle Ages, when Europe saw major advances, including the adoption, through the Silk Road of printing, the astrolabe, and the compass, in many ways sustaining the development of Renaissance Europe and the Age of Exploration.

These exchanges have helped shape identity. A person's identity consists of language, religion, nationality, ethnic belonging and culture. But identity is more than that. Identity is also made up of customs, knowledge and values, which are often shared by people of diverse religious, national, ethnic, cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, people's identities are multi-layered and therefore partially overlap. I am Belgian, unlike most of you. But I enjoy soccer, like some of you. I am a father, like many of you. And I am committed to furthering tolerance and mutual respect, like all of you.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unfortunately, both history and present teach us that diversity often also implies misunderstandings, intolerance or sometimes outright hostility and even genocide. Lest we forget, the terrible tragedy of the Holocaust is there to remind us of the consequences of the extremes that can be caused by intolerance.

While it is essential to remember and to address both causes and symptoms, it also crucially important to look for solutions. In identifying best practices, tools and methods to promote tolerance and understanding, this meeting adopts a positive approach.

Indeed, you are here to confirm that you feel not only concerned about acts of intolerance, but also capable of addressing these important challenges. I invite you to move a step forward. I ask you to acknowledge your responsibilities and identify your role in initiating and promoting inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue.

The setting for such a forward-looking debate could not be better. Kazakhstan, at the crossroads of two continents, is a peaceful multiethnic state with citizens from 130 different nations and 45 confessions! I warmly thank our hosts for welcoming us in beautiful Almaty and sharing their experiences on managing diversity with us.

I also thank the OSCE participating States for their support for and due recognition of this Meeting, which is substantiated by the presence of numerous high-ranking officials and the mobilisation of senior academia, community leaders and civil society representatives.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The sessions of this tolerance implementation meeting span a broad divide of tolerance-related issues. The first session, on the importance of dialogue for conflict prevention and post-conflict reconciliation, demonstrates that tolerance is part of the “core business” of a security organisation like the OSCE. The second session, on partnerships, underscores the salience of multidisciplinary, societal initiatives. This session points out that our action

should extend beyond the organisation of conferences. The third session addresses the respective roles of the range of national, regional and international authorities involved, among which the OSCE plays a valuable part, while final responsibility of course rests with national governments. The fourth and final session looks ahead and examines how the OSCE's work could be further developed.

Our discussions will certainly shed light on the many different approaches that are possible for promoting understanding between different communities.

I trust that we all start from the same premise: nurturing respect and understanding implies a de-politisation of the debate on tolerance. A strong statement for a politician indeed!! We need to be aware that there are vested interests involved in the polarisation that often occurs in relation to tolerance issues. For instance, some political parties draw electoral benefit from portraying Muslims as enemies of Western values and incapable of integration in European society. On the other hand, some regimes and groups in the Islamic world seek to rally support and enhance legitimacy by creating external enemies, which they claim are attacking Islam. By polarising the issue, these two groups create and increase divisions for their own sake. We need to unveil these negative agendas while identifying appropriate avenues for building bridges between communities.

A first avenue for action, then, is the development of an appropriate legal framework to curtail manifestations of intolerance. The OSCE is contributing to such a legal approach, which is mainly in the hands of

national governments. The ODIHR's Advisory Panel of Experts, for instance, has developed Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. These guidelines provide an overview and suggestions for those involved in the drafting and reviewing of laws pertaining to the freedom of religion or belief.

A second avenue for action is measures in the field of education and culture. Such an approach implies the involvement of diverse actors of civil society. Here again, the OSCE can fulfil a facilitating role. For example, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities recently produced Recommendations on Policing in Multi-Ethnic Societies to support the interaction and co-operation between police and individuals belonging to national minorities. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media is organising a special event in June with media practitioners, to discuss dilemmas related to freedom of media, artistic freedom, tolerance building, and self-regulatory mechanisms. Furthermore, ODIHR will be focusing on hate crimes data collection and tolerance education later this year. And the OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje supported a series of scouts camps where ethnic Roma and Vlach children made friends with ethnic Macedonian scouts.

In my opinion, educational and cultural initiatives at societal level provide the most fertile breeding ground for inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding. Outlawing acts and expression of intolerance does not suffice, since intolerance is deeply rooted in our societies and cultures. I would even dare to say that it is part of our human nature. I doubt that any of us is able to be completely free of intolerant thoughts or impulses. We are all

somewhat parochial. The implication of this is that tolerance and intolerance are not absolute opposites. There is a substantial grey zone. Once we are aware of this, our efforts to promote tolerance and understanding are likely to be more effective and persuasive.

The above-mentioned examples of OSCE actions do not do justice to the plethora of tolerance-related activities of the organisation and in particular of the ODIHR. I rely on the respective actors present here, including our three Personal Representatives for combating intolerance and discrimination, to tell us more about their initiatives in the course of the meeting. My brief examples do suffice to show that diverse OSCE actors have launched an array of multidisciplinary initiatives. They indicate that the OSCE is uniquely qualified to host this Meeting. We are a multidimensional organisation with a range of tools, ranging from political agreements to special institutions, monitoring instruments and technical assistance programmes. We have at our disposal expertise and experience in areas that are at the core of our discussions today: human rights, democratisation, a free and responsible media, minority rights, tolerance etcetera. I call on you to make use of all these instruments to achieve our goal: the enhancement of inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding.

Let me stress that the Chairmanship too is very committed to furthering the OSCE's activities in the field of tolerance. The Chairmanship remembered the Holocaust during a ceremony in Brussels on 27 January 2006. The European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation – MEDEA – recently organised a conference in Brussels with the support of the OSCE Chairmanship on the influence of the internet and

satellite television on the relations between the OSCE community and their Mediterranean and Middle Eastern neighbours. Belgium's attachment to promoting intercultural understanding is also demonstrated by our substantial support to the UN 'Alliance of Civilisations' initiative: Belgium is the second-largest donor to this programme. The OSCE is working on its own contribution to the Alliance of Civilizations, which Chairman in Office Karel De Gucht and the Secretary-General will present to Kofi Annan at the end of June. Finally, the cartoons controversy has spurred us to, jointly with the delegations of the OSCE participating States, develop an ambitious strategy document with numerous initiatives, including for instance the organisation of the NGO meeting that preceded this meeting.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are all members of the OSCE family because we share the same values: we are resolved to promote a climate of confidence of respect among peoples. It is therefore a true pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of the Belgian Chairmanship to this Tolerance Implementation Meeting. I am certain it will be one of the highlights of this OSCE year.

Thank you.

I would now like to pass the floor to Rolf Ekeus, the High Commissioner on National Minorities.