

**OSCE Human Dimension Implementation meeting 2014**  
**Statement by the Delegation of Canada**  
**Working Session 14: Fundamental Freedoms II,**  
**including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief**  
**1 October, 2014**

Mr. Moderator,

At last year's HDIM, Canada's Ambassador for Religious Freedom, Dr. Andrew Bennett, spoke of our deep concern about the ongoing targeting of religious communities, not only through increasing social hostilities towards these communities in different parts of the world, but also in increasing government restrictions against those who wish to freely exercise their religious beliefs, both individually and collectively as members of religious communities.

He also emphasised that religious freedom as reflected in Article 18 of the ICCPR means more than just freedom to worship. Religious freedom is a human right and it relies on, supports, and complements other fundamental rights, such as freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the right to self-determination. Without the right to freedom of religion or belief, individuals would no longer have the freedom to choose their faith, the freedom to study and preach it, the freedom to engage in missionary activity, and the freedom to hold no religious beliefs.

Canada was therefore pleased to welcome the adoption last year of the Ministerial Decision on Freedom of Religion, Thought, Conscience or Belief. In particular, the decision calls on participating States to "refrain from imposing restrictions inconsistent with OSCE commitments and international obligations on the practice of religion or belief by individuals and religious communities".

Canada has taken steps to further support the OSCE's Religious Freedom agenda through supporting an initiative of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights that aims to promote international standards on freedom of religion, focusing on recognition of religious or belief communities in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the South Caucasus. This support underscores Canada's strong commitment to advancing religious freedom as a foreign policy priority, and augments our wider engagement to ensure long term peace, stability, and security for the people of Ukraine.

In line with the OSCE Ministerial Decision, we encourage OSCE participating States to take action to address issues such as the use of legislation pertaining to registration of religious organizations to obstruct and curtail activities of religious communities, the use of blasphemy laws that consider criticism of religious beliefs, religious organizations and religious practices or religious debate as a crime, and the inability of some religious communities to peacefully practice their religion without the threat of violence and persecution.

Canada believes -and research shows- that religious freedom, pluralism, peace and security foster the growth of strong democratic institutions and long-term prosperity. Individuals who are free to

practise their faith in safety and security are also free to contribute to the economic, cultural and political developments of their country, for the benefit of all.

Canada welcomes the creation last year of two ODIHR positions dedicated to freedom of religion under its Human Rights Department and is pleased to support ODIHR's project work through extra-budgetary assistance.

Canada's recommendations for this session are:

-For OSCE participating States to ensure that legislation pertaining to registration of religious organizations embrace the principles of Article 18 and are not used to obstruct and curtail activities of religious communities;

-For OSCE participating States to repeal the provisions of blasphemy laws that consider criticism of religious beliefs, religious organizations and religious practices or religious debate as a crime;

-For OSCE participating States to respect the right of those individuals who wish to change their religion or belief;

-For OSCE participating States to ensure that religious communities are able to peacefully practice their religion without the threat of violence and persecution.

-For OSCE participating States to cooperate and work closely with ODIHR's Human Rights and Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Departments to benefit from their expertise and experience, so as to better meet OSCE commitments on Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, as well as combating hate crime and discrimination on the basis of religion.