

**Statement of the United Kingdom
OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting - Warsaw 2013
Session No. 6: Freedom of Religion or Belief**

Madam Moderator

I fully subscribe to the views expressed by the European Union. I would like to add a few remarks from our national perspective.

Freedom of religion or belief is a priority area for the UK Government and we are committed to promoting and protecting it domestically, bilaterally and in multilateral fora. This freedom includes the right to change one's beliefs, to question the tenets of a religion, to share one's faith in a non-coercive manner, or to live without any religious conviction.

It is inseparable from other human rights including freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. When one of these rights is undermined or restricted there is an impact across societies and there are repercussions for civil and political rights for all regardless of their beliefs.

The freedom primarily concerns individuals and their right to live free from discrimination, injustice or persecution on the grounds of their religion or belief, and the right to contribute equally to society. The UK believes that international human rights law is not intended to protect beliefs themselves, but the freedom of individuals to manifest their religion or belief. Permissible restrictions or limitations on this manifestation should be the exception, to be applied in a non-discriminatory manner, and only as set out in international human rights law and to protect the freedom of others.

The OSCE, the UK and many other states and international organisations make great efforts to promote and protect the freedom of

religion or belief. But the situation for most of the world's population continues to deteriorate in 2013. Nor is discrimination restricted to one specific faith community: where one group suffers others are not normally far behind. This means that our response should be holistic, approaching the freedom as a universal human right rather than attempting a patchwork quilt of protections for various communities.

We welcome the intention of the Chairman-in-Office to promote freedom of religion or belief including through inter-religious dialogue. In order to secure full freedom of religion or belief throughout our region we need to ensure we pay sufficient attention to intra-religious dialogue as well, as often it is a dispute over the various schools of thought within a religion that leads to violations of this freedom.

We welcome the work of ODIHR and we should all take advantage of their assistance and expertise. We support the work of the Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief including in developing *Guidelines on Recognition of Religious or Belief Communities*. There is a need for clarity within the OSCE region of the international standards and good practices on the use of recognition and the UK has worked with partners to attempt to address this shortcoming. We continue to believe, however, that these guidelines should be carefully presented as part of a wider series, to avoid giving the impression that states should be looking to register believers. Although registration is permissible on security grounds, it should not be the norm.

In conclusion, we urge all participating States to implement their existing OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief. However, commitments and changes to legislation are not enough. Governments, NGOs and civil society actors need to recognise this freedom as a barometer for the state of wider human rights in any given country, and to work together to ensure that it is protected.