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SUPPLEMENTARY HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING

***FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA:
PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION
(13-14 JULY 2006, VIENNA)
Session II***

**“Those who can make you believe absurdities
can make you commit atrocities.”**

Voltaire

Mr. Moderator,

In a recent conference on hate-speech co-organized by Miklos Haraszti in Budapest, I argued that hate speech, if not checked, can unleash violent conflict, and historically has proven its capacity to trigger genocides. I also underlined that an even-handed framework of law is necessary for a just and inclusive society where members of faith communities enjoy the same protections and rights as others in civil society – no less, but no more. This, I said, is particularly important in a social context where racist and xenophobic views have become acceptable in mainstream public and political discourse.

One of the participants asked me what I would think of the Enlightenment then, implying a lack of understanding on my side regarding the role of free speech to challenge conventional thinking and religious dogma. This, I thought, was a commonplace cultural arrogance. I, like many Muslims, fully understand and value Voltaire as one of the most eloquent and tireless advocate of freedom of expression and the Enlightenment. However, I also know and appreciate his views on toleration which embraced all men of different faith as brothers.

Miklos Haraszti's opening statement yesterday which described Prophet cartoons as “secular artistic depictions of religious objects” was not inspiring lead to chart a course for our debate, but rather revealed the fact that lessons have not yet been learnt from the recent crisis. Haraszti's views reflect those of his own, not based on consensus among the participating States, as such not of the OSCE. In commenting on the Prophet cartoons, we would have expected him to be consistent and even-handed in reiterating his call on the press to fight the “New Insensitivity” which he made during the Berlin Conference on Anti-Semitism in 2004 where in the context of another cartoon offered some criticism to a lacking sense of responsibility both on the part of the cartoonist, the editor and the British Political Cartoon Society. This time, however, the “New Insensitivity” would be intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

As I have said it elsewhere, we, as responsible managers of our respective States, cannot be neutral bystanders watching anxiously to a potential unraveling of societal fabric, because we fear that we shall never be able to define and demarcate what constitutes hate speech and distinguish it from speech that defames and offends. For us the significance of the

composition of this gathering is for the practitioners of media to tell us in which way we could work with them, what role they are prepared to play to overcome this seemingly intractable dichotomy.

I have attended several meetings addressing the very issues that we are broaching today. Sadly, from almost all of them I came out with the unrelieving and discomforting impression that:

- We have not been able to define the problem, let alone grasping the political and social gravity of it.
- Deliberately choosing to ignore the colossal size of the political iceberg and its course of collision, but focus on its tip. This is demonstrated in this disconcerting misnomer of calling it the cartoon crisis.
- There is little attempt if any in developing a middle ground on which freedom of speech and respect for religious values would harmoniously meet, rather than remain in a state of eternal confrontation and a zero-sum relationship as many portray them to be.
- There is the vein, almost arrogant expectation that the problem will disappear with the frequency of sermonizing about freedom of expression, like the number of injections of preventive medicine.
- I suspect, if we are not careful and sensitive, the way we handle this matter in the OSCE could become a “cartoon” itself.

Mr. Moderator,

We, on our part, while thanking many participants for their thoughtful recommendations mainly driven by their practices and experiences, would like to contribute to the debate with several concrete proposals for the media:

- Media professionals and their products aimed at promoting diversity should be supported through awards.
- Media should employ more journalists from communities with different cultural and religious backgrounds.
- Journalists should be provided on the job training on how to report issues related to cultural and religious diversity.
- Media should develop effective ethical standards to prohibit the use of racist terms and prejudicial or derogatory stereotypes.

Thank you.