

**OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting
on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Understanding
Almaty, 12-13 June 2006**

Session II:

**Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Partnerships as a Tool to Counter
Stereotypes and Prejudice and to Promote Mutual Respect and Understanding in Public
and Political Discourse**

**Address by Günter Nooke,
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Chairman,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to participate in this important event in Almaty to promote inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding. My thanks go to our host, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, for his kind hospitality and to his staff for the outstanding planning and organization of this meeting. I am delighted that Kazakhstan is thus underscoring its engagement for the topic of tolerance. With its numerous ethnic groups and religions, Kazakhstan is an excellent venue, a place where the issues are particularly relevant. By organizing this event, Kazakhstan is demonstrating its active commitment to the OSCE, an organization it would like to chair in 2009. We support its candidacy. We also know what distinguishes Kazakhstan from some other countries in the region. We know that Kazakhstan is well aware of the responsibility the chairmanship brings – which requires further reforms and no further steps backwards.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since the start of the year I have been the Federal Government's Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Aid at the German Federal Foreign Office. It is my task to follow international developments in the field of human rights policy and humanitarian aid and to advise the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs on the direction to be taken by our policy. Within Germany I am in contact with the parties represented in our parliament, with NGOs, social groups and institutions concerned with human rights and humanitarian aid. One

of my duties will be to head the German delegation at meetings of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The subject of this conference is of special interest to me personally because it is central to the intellectual underpinning of human rights and to all that we can achieve together as regards their protection.

Inter-religious, inter-ethnic and inter-cultural partnerships are a tool for the promotion of a positive public and political discourse. I would like to present three personal thoughts on this subject, not least with a view to a later discussion:

1. A dialogue between different religions, ethnic groups and cultures only makes sense if we know the ideological and religious foundations, fundamental values and basic convictions of our own societies, our own points of view. This is a necessary precondition for a useful and constructive dialogue with representatives of other religions and cultures. On this point, I must also criticize my own society. I have the impression that Germans are not always clear about their own identity. Secularization and the rise of the individual in western and central Europe have led to the importance of faith and religion being frequently underestimated. I would therefore like to stress that I consider myself a Christian, and will speak today as such. And for this reason I am very much in favour of freedom of religion.
2. If we are to take religion seriously – both ours and other people's – we must meet each other with respect. This includes the respect of human rights by all. It is my firm conviction that the credibility of religions suffers if human rights and the lives of others are held in disregard.
3. At this meeting, we will be looking at the subject of inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue. We should also expend some thought on which of these three factors predominates, which is the most important to us. Is it our cultural identity, our religious identity or our ethnic identity? Or is it not the case that all three factors are inseparably intertwined? I believe, by the way, that the significance of ethnic differences was profoundly underestimated in Europe prior to the conflict in Yugoslavia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

How does the German Government support inter-religious, inter-ethnic and inter-cultural partnerships? By such partnerships I mean ones within Germany itself as well as partnerships involving a German partner. I will focus my comments on the field of youth and sports, for the one part. For the other part, I will talk about a German initiative that has already been copied as a best practice by other countries – our "dialogue with Islam", or more precisely, "dialogue with the Islamic world". This metaphorical name expresses the idea that we look the "Islam" factor squarely in the eye in our encounters with Muslim societies, a factor which as you know does not only have a religious dimension, but also a political and cultural one.

It is my personal opinion that tangible cooperation between members of different religions, ethnic groups and cultures has proven to be far more effective than academic debates. There is no doubt a need for discussion groups. But their audience is far smaller, and often comprises the "converted" – people who have already reflected on the challenges presented by the co-existence of religions and cultures and are already aware of the difficulties. In my view, trust and affection can be better inspired by working together on problems that need to be solved in cooperation.

- The German Government considers young people a vital element in its work on combating right-wing extremism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Basic values and attitudes are frequently fixed when people are young, and tend to remain more or less fixed for life. Such ingrained values have a crucial influence on people's later actions. To illustrate the Government's approach, I would like to report about its programme of action entitled "Young People for Tolerance and Democracy - Against Right-Wing Extremism, Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism". This wide-ranging programme is a major plank in our strategy to eliminate xenophobia. Through it, the German Government promotes and supports democratic action, civic engagement, tolerance and an outward-looking approach, in particular among young people. Germany is thereby pursuing a preventive, educational approach. Since the programme of action was launched in 2001, we have funded more than 4,000 projects, initiatives and measures to the tune of over 163 million euro. Many of these projects nurture partnerships.
- The programme of action is an umbrella for various measures and activities to counter right-wing extremism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism. It targets companies and associations, trade unions, local authorities and vocational schools, and thereby seeks to make a direct impact at the interface between schools and practical training. It encourages youngsters and young adults from different backgrounds to live and work together. In this way it also fosters intercultural dialogue on a personal level. Civic

education measures also receive promotion. One project, for example, aims to enhance cooperation between schools and immigration centres. Another project for local and immigrant school pupils encourages them to examine their own religions and the belief systems of their fellow pupils. This project is a personal favourite of mine. It provides many Germans with their first opportunity to learn to talk about faith and religion.

Youth exchange plays a key role at bi-national level. By way of example I would like to mention the youth exchanges between Germany and Israel, which go back to the year 1955, although official diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel were only established some ten years later. The goal of the German-Israeli youth exchange programme is for people to get to know each other, to promote understanding and joint action. It gives young people an opportunity to broaden their horizons and become familiar with other cultures and religions. Up to the year 2000, almost ten thousand young people from Israel and Germany had taken part in exchange activities every year. The exchange programme with Israel is particularly important to us Germans, not least because of the history that links us. The German Government still contributes funds of approximately two million euro per year, making it Germany's fourth biggest exchange programme behind those with France, Poland and the United States of America.

The World Cup, which is being hosted by Germany this year, is currently the focus of much Government attention. Our chosen motto for this year's World Cup is therefore "A Time to Make Friends". As hosts, we are attaching great importance to this sentiment. The German Government has thus for some time now been working together with FIFA, the German Football Association and in close collaboration with the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia on projects that emphasize the uniting function of sport. They should however also highlight the need to actively combat all forms of discrimination, xenophobia and racism – regardless of whether they are based on racial or religious motives. By amending its disciplinary rules, FIFA has created a number of important tools for effectively fighting racism and discrimination in football. It will hold its annual anti-racism day and various high-profile anti-racism events under the slogan "Say No to Racism" during the World Cup in Germany. FIFA will cooperate with FARE (Football Against Racism in Europe), in particular on events prior to the kick-off for the quarter-finals on 30 June and 1 July. A large number of world-famous players will also take part in other anti-racism events. And I would like to stress here and now that the German Government strongly supports the European Parliament's declaration on fighting racism in football.

On a separate note, quite irrespective of the World Cup, our programme of action "Young People for Tolerance and Democracy" has supported numerous sporting events, in particular street football and street basketball. These projects show how irrelevant ethnic and religious differences are, not just in sport, but in everyday life.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Following the attacks of September 11th, 2001, Germany made "Dialogue with the Islamic World" a new political priority. The relevant staff and money were made available in the Federal Foreign Office. The term "Dialogue with Islam" is to be understood metaphorically. It includes all forms of action with one common goal: to make people from Islamic societies and from western societies alike better able to understand the cultural backgrounds of the other, to encourage them to discard their prejudices and to work together on solving problems. The Dialogue with Islam can thereby do much to bridge the cultural gulf between the West and the Islamic world. Its job is to eliminate anti-western stereotypes in Islamic-based societies and to prevent radicalization. We want to focus above all on the region around the Middle East. Our prime goal is conflict prevention. In addition, the Dialogue is designed to increase acceptance of the universal values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Both the activities of the German cultural institute, the Goethe Institute, and development cooperation in general, duly respect the significance of Islam. As part of this Dialogue, on which more than six million euro is spent on practical measures each year, there are a whole range of projects that have as their aim the development and growth of partnerships.

The Federal Foreign Office is trying to further develop this programme, building on achievements to date. Our experience of the Dialogue with Islam leads us to think that projects should in the future be yet more targeted to young people. Young people are of special importance in the Arab world, as in many other world regions including central Asia, simply due to their large numbers. Roughly speaking, about half the population of all Muslim societies is not yet grown up. It is therefore an obvious step to focus our efforts even more on this target group. It represents the future of these societies.

In addition to the promotion of such partnerships by the German Government, there are of course many other measures being taken in Germany, in particular at Bundesland and local authority level. A great many inter-religious, inter-ethnic and inter-cultural partnerships have also been established by citizens themselves, who need no public incentives and work completely independently of state agencies.

I am convinced that we can gain a better understanding of religions and cultures through such measures of practical cooperation. But differences will remain and should remain. What I find unacceptable, as the Human Rights Commissioner of a democratic government and as a Christian, is for basic human rights to be violated under the guise of differences between cultures, religions and ethnic customs. We have to be honest with ourselves and in our own policies. More often than not, religious and cultural customs are not behind such human rights violations, but rather concrete political interests.

Let us seize the opportunity here in Almaty to learn from each other and to learn with each other. I look forward to a lively exchange of opinions and thank you for your attention.