

OSCE CONFERENCE ON COMBATING DISCRIMINATION AND PROMOTING MUTUAL RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING

Plenary Session 3

**UK Delegation
Joanna Chellapermal (CSW)**

Thank you Madame Chairman,

I am speaking on behalf of CSW, a Christian human rights NGO working for freedom of thought, religion and belief as well as raising concerns of Central Asia Network, a loose coalition of NGOs, such as OSI, HRW and CSW, seeking to influence EU policy on Central Asia. I wish to briefly highlight three issues:

Firstly, at the Civil Society Preparatory meeting, there was a clear demand that violations of freedom of thought and belief should be addressed as fundamental human rights violations just like associated freedoms of speech and assembly. In other words, it is a litmus test for the overall status of human rights. There is a concern that discussing such violations under the umbrella of tolerance and discrimination does not fully address the issue.

Of course the rights-based approach and the tolerance-based approach are both vital aspects of a holistic approach in an attempt to ensure freedom of thought and belief. However it is impossible to build tolerance where faith communities face harassment, imprisonment and torture for practising their belief. Unfortunately we have seen a discernible shift solely towards a tolerance based approach when there are major human rights violations in a number of OSCE participating states such as Belarus, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. We have provided some reports outside the hall.

In Uzbekistan the government has a highly restrictive law on religion which severely limits the freedom of thought and belief of all religious communities and the government controls practices of religious communities especially the majority Muslim community. Recently, Protestant pastor Dimitry Shestakov was sentenced to four years imprisonment in an open work camp merely for practising his belief and leading a congregation of the Full Gospel Church in Andijan. Reportedly his friends and family are concerned about his health and whereabouts as the authorities have transferred him to an unknown location citing his poor health. Pastor Shestakov is one of a number of prisoners of conscience currently imprisoned in Uzbekistan.

Members of Central Asia network have presented some key human rights benchmarks that we hope the EU member states as well as other OSCE participating States and

institutions will raise in dialogue with Uzbekistan. These include: end of repression and release of all prisoners of conscience such as human rights defenders, independent journalists and members of Muslim and Christian communities imprisoned for their belief; end of torture and implementation of recommendations made by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture; creating space for civil society and allowing local and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to operate freely; ensure that freedom of thought, religion and belief is respected in both law and practice according to Uzbekistan's international commitments; and finally implement recommendations of the OSCE Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion and Belief.

A similarly severe situation exists in Turkmenistan where there is also strict government control of all faith communities. The laws of the state violate both international and OSCE commitments and faith communities face repression from government and local security officials. On May 14 the government sentenced a Baptist leader to three years imprisonment in labour camp. One of the most well-known cases of prisoners of conscience is that of former chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah who was sentenced to 22 years imprisonment in 2004. We ask the OSCE participating States to urge Turkmenistan to respect the freedom of thought and belief and to fulfil its commitments in this area.

In line with earlier recommendations, we urge the OSCE to return to the rights based approach and to allocate necessary resources to the ODIHR. We also urge the OSCE to seriously address freedom of thought and belief both as part of the human rights department as well within its tolerance programmes. In practice it would mean that violations of freedom of thought and belief would be addressed by a dedicated staff member within the ODIHR human rights department and discrimination of and intolerance against religious communities would be addressed by dedicated staff members within the tolerance department. We also wish to commend the work of the existing structures especially the Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion and Belief and ask that its work is expanded and fully supported by the OSCE participating States.

Additionally, we hope that the OSCE participating States will strive for regular dialogue with religious communities and organisations working on freedom of thought, religion and belief as is the case with the UK and Dutch government.

Secondly, we have seen growing interest and engagement on the part of EU in OSCE areas such as Central Asia. These are areas where OSCE has particular expertise and experience not to mention a strong practical presence on the ground. Given that EU member states, including the new member states, are also OSCE participating states it follows that EU involvement in OSCE specialist areas should be guided by working principles of OSCE and that EU and OSCE should seek to strengthen and develop further their co-operation and ensure there is complimentary of policies especially in the area of human rights.

EU is currently discussing a comprehensive Central Asia strategy paper. Central Asia Network was concerned that EU would allow short-term energy and strategic interest to prevail but we understand that concerned leadership of certain EU member states ensured

that human rights considerations were included. The paper will address a number of areas and we believe OSCE is the ideal organisation to assist EU in implementing the policy recommendations and programmes arising from the strategy paper.

Finally, we note with regret that the programming of the conference is unfortunately experiencing similar problems to the Cordoba conference. Due to scheduling and other issues, sessions on combating discrimination of Muslim and Christian communities and racism have been given less prominence than others. For example, session 2 on combating discrimination of Muslim communities took place considerably later than scheduled which meant that many worthwhile interventions were made to nearly an empty room and with no interpretation. Session 3 on combating discrimination of Christian and other belief groups was allocated too little time and again many interventions went unheard.

We propose extending the official conference to a three day one where the first day would be dedicated solely to discussion on anti-Semitism and the thematic issue of hate crimes and the following two days would focus on other forms of discrimination and thematic issues such as freedom of thought and belief. Alternatively, the OSCE might consider organising two separate conference – one on tolerance and one on freedom of thought and belief. We also propose that the organisers will allocate adequate time for interventions of both participating states and NGOs and other organisations present to ensure that the crucial participatory ethos of the conference is maintained.