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**STATEMENT BY THE DELEGATION OF SWITZERLAND
AT THE MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

26 June 2008

**In response to the report by Ambassador Knut Vollebaek,
OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities**

Mr. Chairman,

The Swiss delegation welcomes Ambassador Vollebaek, the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, to today's meeting of the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive periodic report. In its central, second, section this report offers a detailed account of the High Commissioner's travels and consultations, concluding with a focusing of attention on the "Roma and Sinti" minority, which, scattered as it is throughout Europe, has repeatedly been the victim of discriminatory treatment. The Finnish Chairmanship has declared this minority group to be a subject of particular concern during the year 2008, and accordingly it will be a special item on the agenda of the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting to be held on 10 and 11 July here in the Hofburg.

Allow me, however, to return to the first, introductory, section of the report. In it, in line with his mandate, the High Commissioner has provided us with a thematically focused central document prepared by his institution in The Hague, which, although based on preliminary work carried out by both of his predecessors, has now reached the point where it is ready for publication and implementation: "Recommendations regarding national minorities in inter-State relations".

Mr. Chairman,

In point of fact, as Ambassador Vollebaek has himself put it, these recommendations deal with the "raison d'être" of his OSCE institution, which has been in existence since 1992. The 19 recommendations constitute a comprehensive and coherent code for the objective assessment of transborder minority issues and for their resolution on a basis of consensus. The recommendations are founded on generally accepted principles enshrined in international law. The propositions deriving from them also rest on the experience of international politics and on the multilateral and bilateral models for resolution that have been developed in this area.

Although we lack a universally applicable definition under international law, there is clearly a consensus to the effect that minority rights always constitute an integral part of the

human and civil rights to be enjoyed by individuals and, as such, are to be protected by the State in which these individuals reside. Rather than taking the form of claims put forward by ethnic groups in traditional settlement areas, minority rights should be seen as rights to the protection of individual citizens or inhabitants in the State where they are residing as members of a religious, linguistic, cultural or ethnic minority vis-à-vis the majority group. In any case, within the OSCE there is no longer any question that minority rights — as indeed human rights in general since Helsinki 1975 — can no longer be regarded exclusively as an internal matter in a particular State, but that, wherever they are violated, they become a legitimate subject of concern on the part of the international community. In this sense, acting before and alongside the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the United Nations have already developed multilateral legal instruments by which our countries are guided in framing their laws and practical policies with respect to minorities.

Mr. Chairman,

A sensitive approach to minorities and their concerns is an important precondition for preventing the emergence of conflicts, both within a particular State and between countries. Over the last two decades we have unfortunately, in the very area encompassing the OSCE participating States, garnered sufficient bitter experience indicating what can happen when policy-makers fail to deal with minorities and their concerns and to seek solutions designed to tackle preventively the problems that may arise.

The recommendations put before us by the High Commissioner today represent an important contribution to the effort to deal with minority issues not only in a national but also in a regional context transcending national borders. For this reason, the Swiss delegation regards these recommendations as political guidelines and as an important instrument of conflict prevention giving them a role of central importance within the OSCE. We hope that the High Commissioner for National Minorities will receive the necessary support from all OSCE participating States when the time comes to translate into reality the political commitments arising out of these guidelines.

In any case, we wish Ambassador Vollebaek every success in his important work.

Mr. Chairman,

The delegation of the Principality of Liechtenstein wishes to associate itself with this statement.

Thank you for your attention.