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Speech by H.E. Minister Laila Freivalds, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Sweden

Session II: The role of governments and civil society in promoting tolerance, respect and mutual understanding, particularly through interfaith and intercultural dialogue and partnerships

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The lack of tolerance, respect and mutual understanding challenges our democratic institutions and the security of our societies. We have to react at an early stage to counter such tendencies. My predecessor, the late Anna Lindh, was strongly committed to the promotion and protection of human rights of all individuals. I share this commitment and I am here today to carry it further. If we do not tackle these problems they may soon very well threaten to undermine our societies and their democratic foundation.

Sweden's integration policy aims at equal rights and opportunities for everyone, ethnic and cultural background should make no difference. We want social cohesion built on diversity and respect for differences.

To counteract and prevent the social exclusion of immigrants is one of the most important tasks for our government. I dare say we have already done a lot, but much remains to be done, not least when it comes to equal opportunities on the labour market. Honestly, I feel ashamed that some people still face problems entering the Swedish labour market just because they have a foreign name.

When last year our government set up the agency The Living History, the Holocaust was the starting point. This agency promotes work, discussion and reflection on democracy, tolerance and human rights. The aim is to strengthen people's will to actively work for the equality of all human beings. The Living History Forum and the National Council for Crime

Prevention are undertaking a major survey among pupils on attitudes and participation regarding xenophobia, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. The understanding between religious faiths is crucial. To make such dialogues possible the government gives grants to the main religious communities through the Swedish Commission for State Grants to Religious Communities. Furthermore, the government has a special council for cooperation between the state and the religious communities, chaired by the Minister for Culture.

In order to manifest and develop the diversity in the cultural area the Swedish government has announced 2006 as the "Year of Multiculture". One of the most important principles in the national cultural policy is to increase the general participation in the cultural society.

Mr Chairman,

Many conventions are signed and ratified in the name of international cooperation and understanding. But the work does not end there. The real commitment and work lies with the implementation. And here I should like to underline the responsibility we have as governments.

In 1999 the Swedish parliament adopted a new unified policy on national minorities, with the objective to protect national minorities, promote their participation in community affairs and public decision-making and keep long established minority languages alive.

In 2002 the government established the Council for Roma Issues as an advisory board to the government. The Council is chaired by the Minister for Democracy and Integration. It is a national promoter of effectuating and developing the commitments linked to the fact that the Roma is a national minority. In order to strengthen the position of Roma women and to increase their opportunities to exercise an influence, an informal working group has been set up with representatives of the government offices and Roma women.

Mr Chairman,

All this is being done. Still it is not enough. We are not living in a perfect society, so we have a number of challenges before us.

Legislation that aims to counteract discrimination on grounds of ethnic origin or religion is crucial for a credible policy on minorities. As an example, a recent report by the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination concludes that it is vital to make the Roma population visible in the Swedish society and to increase knowledge and raise awareness about the Roma and their situation. Therefore, the government intends to launch an initiative, directed to young Roma and young people in general in Sweden to increase the knowledge and raise awareness on these issues.

To conclude, I would like to stress the important work undertaken by the OSCE and its institutions, especially in the field, and not least by the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). The OSCE is a very important tool in the prevention of conflicts in our region. The fight against intolerance, xenophobia and racism is a challenge in virtually all participating states. That is why we are here today, and that is also why we will continue to contribute to the efforts of the organization, which is small in size, efficient and cost effective.

Thank you.