

**Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Tarja Halonen
at the Opening Session of the
16th Ministerial Council in Helsinki on 4 December 2008
(check against delivery)**

It is a pleasure to welcome you to Helsinki on the occasion of the 16th Ministerial Council of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Much has changed since our predecessors first met in Finlandia Hall in 1975. Helsinki has changed dramatically, and so have Finland, Europe and the rest of the world. Also the OSCE has transformed greatly. The OSCE is a real juridical organization; it is no longer a wandering conference, travelling from one capital to the next.

The OSCE holds a special place in Finnish foreign policy.

The 1975 Helsinki summit produced a breakthrough agreement on a set of principles that still guide the 56 participating States of the OSCE today. The 'spirit of Helsinki' brought together Cold War rivals, and was instrumental in helping bridge an East-West divide in Europe. At the second Helsinki Summit in 1992, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe was strengthened to address the new challenges facing our region, and the CSCE became a major actor for conflict prevention and crisis management.

In this way, Helsinki has been tied to turning points in the history of the Organization and of the relations between our States. Finland received the OSCE Chairmanship in 2008 keenly aware of this history and inspired by it.

Finland remains firmly committed to the principles of the OSCE, which are the foundations of this Organization. Respect for democracy and rule of law, protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, sound economic and environmental governance and political-military co-operation between States are essential pillars of a comprehensive concept of security.

This ambitious body of commitments lies at the core of the OSCE and serves as a compass guiding the participating States. We all need to work further in implementing the commitments we have jointly undertaken.

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This year has been challenging in many ways.

The process leading to the independence of Kosovo, led by my predecessor President Martti Ahtisaari at the request of the United Nations, turned out to be divisive. In spite of prolonged negotiations the proposed solution to the status question was not acceptable to all countries.

In August, an armed conflict broke suddenly out in Georgia. Lives were tragically lost, and persons were and remain displaced from their homes. The OSCE showed its

strength in contributing to the ceasefire and swiftly enhancing its monitoring activities. The OSCE also took a lead in bringing together the EU and the UN to create a platform for the Geneva discussions. The situation is still fragile and all sides must strictly adhere to the ceasefire agreement.

The unresolved conflicts in the OSCE area undermine our common security and pose a serious threat our citizens. The recent events further underlined the need to intensify our efforts to promote their settlement.

Many of our countries are struggling with a deepening financial crisis. Regaining confidence requires closely co-ordinated action by governments, international financial institutions and the banking sector. In the longer term, the implications of climate change could shape our priorities and it could be identified as one of the biggest security challenges requiring concrete action without delay.

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We celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in a few days. We should honour this important declaration and continue to be guided by it.

Promoting human security is an important goal for Finland. At a time of crisis, humanitarian action should start immediately to protect refugees and displaced persons. Demining is often necessary to save human lives in post-conflict situations.

Attention should be paid to the well-being of the most vulnerable groups. Human rights and fundamental freedoms must be guaranteed to everybody. Gender equality is a crucial element in the positive development of our countries. Involving minorities in public life should be our objective and we should recognize the growing contribution that migrants make in our societies. Promoting tolerance and non-discrimination in our own countries should be complemented with international efforts such as the Alliance of Civilizations.

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The participants of this OSCE Ministerial Council should use the opportunity to look beyond the burning issues of the day and share views on the future of security in Europe. The Presidents of the Russian Federation and France have already contributed to this debate. I hope that it will be continued in an open and constructive atmosphere.

We should not assume that current practices of co-operation will continue forever unchanged. In discussing our future co-operation we should, however, build on the solid foundation of our common values and commitments. They have enabled Europe to broaden democracy, strengthen the rule of law and bring universal human rights and fundamental freedoms to its people.

I wish you a successful meeting.