



## Statement by Human Rights First

### Working Session 2: Freedom of religion or belief

September 29, 2009

Across the OSCE region, freedom of religion or belief is jeopardized by the proliferation of violent acts motivated by religious intolerance. Hate crimes fueled by anti-Christian, anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim and similar biases affect individuals' ability to freely practice a religion and safely meet with coreligionists.

Virtually every religious community in the OSCE has been subjected to acts of vandalism and other serious property damage, and individuals associated with religious groups have been targeted for violence. The desecration of graves and cemeteries is also a common problem. In recent months, the following attacks have occurred:

- In the United States, a white supremacist carried out an attack on the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, killing a security guard.
- In a German courtroom in Dresden, a Muslim woman was brutally murdered by a neo-Nazi sympathizer who expressed disdain over the victim's choice to wear a headscarf.
- The historic Christian cemetery of Valukli was desecrated in Turkey when unknown perpetrators broke 90 tombstones that bore the sign of the cross.

Acts motivated by religious intolerance create an atmosphere of fear that obstructs individual rights to freedom of religion and belief.

While adherents of all religions are victimized by ultranationalist violence, a high level of aggression is directed toward so-called "nontraditional" religions, especially in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Private acts of harassment and violence against members of minority religions and faith communities usually occur in the context of public policies and pronouncements restricting the freedom of religion of those professing nontraditional faiths. As a result, individuals associated with nontraditional religious groups become more vulnerable and visible targets for violent acts motivated by prejudice and intolerance.

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Nontraditional groups are often described by officials, media, and the general public as “totalitarian sects.” In official rhetoric against these “new movements” and nontraditional faiths—including the Hare Krishna, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Pentecostals—public officials have demonized them, emphasizing their “alien” nature and foreign funding, sometimes adding accusations of espionage. Restrictive policies include arbitrary and overly burdensome registration requirements, restrictions on building permits for places of worship, formal or informal bans on the rental of places of assembly for religious services, and sporadic public statements by political leaders denouncing minority faiths.

In the climate of xenophobia and religious chauvinism to which these policies contribute, members of minority religious congregations are particularly susceptible to threats and physical attacks carried out by private citizens. The public discourse of hostility toward minority religions, official discrimination that limits the rights to freedom of religion, and the governments’ failure to protect religious minorities are unacceptable.

Under OSCE commitments, governments are obligated to respond to hate crimes, including acts of violence targeting religious communities and individuals. However, as with other forms of bias-motivated crime, many participating States have been slow to take action against this violence.

Human Rights First calls on participating States to secure freedom of religion to all, by:

- taking steps to ensure the implementation of constitutional and international norms guaranteeing freedom of conscience and religion;
- affirming publicly the equality before the law of members of all religious communities and refraining from using rhetoric that divides groups into “traditional” and “nontraditional;”
- investigating and prosecuting cases of bias-motivated violence against individuals or property associated with religious communities;
- resisting calls to legally restrict the “defamation of religions” as there is a high risk that incitement laws and religious defamation laws will unnecessarily trample upon the right to freedom of expression.