



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

Address by
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to the
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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be given the opportunity to address you today at the opening plenary session of this year's Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM). I wish to thank Ambassador Strohal and his team for organizing this annual event and for having put together such an impressive programme for the two weeks to come. By bringing together representatives of governments, civil society and international organizations, the HDIM has become and will continue to be an important arena for debate and discussion aimed at ensuring respect and fulfilment of the commitments made by the OSCE participating States in the field of the human dimension.

Recently, I was asked to address an audience attending a seminar entitled "Operational Conflict Prevention" at the UN Headquarters in New York. The event coincided with the presentation of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's second report on the prevention of armed conflict. In his report the UN Secretary-General drew attention to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) as instruments for conflict prevention. There is now, I believe, a growing international recognition of the importance of operational conflict prevention – as difficult as it may be to implement. We are slowly progressing from just talking about the virtue of conflict prevention to actually carrying it out.

The OSCE has done pioneering work in this field, and as the institution of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities was set up to be an instrument of conflict prevention, I would like to focus on this subject today. While doing so, I will draw special attention to two issues that are highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's report as being indispensable means of conflict prevention. Issues that are, I believe, especially evident and relevant here today, namely the relationship between human rights and conflict prevention and the pivotal role of a vibrant civil society in preventing conflict.

When the HCNM was established in 1992, this was concrete recognition of the fact that violent conflicts in today's world are often fuelled and exacerbated by inter-ethnic tension and tensions between majority and minorities. Tensions that can originate from a sense of exclusion and alienation from society at large, or a sense of threat to one's identity – ethnic,

cultural, linguistic and religious. Such tensions can flare into conflict in a situation where state borders are redrawn, where there is economic instability, social and political upheaval or where States seek to re-establish a national identity in the wake of newly achieved independence, sometimes at the cost of the identity of the minorities living within their borders. Such tensions within a state can have complex repercussions on security in regional and international contexts, not least through their impact on kin-states or neighbouring communities. In creating the institution of the HCNM, the OSCE participating States were not merely reacting to the then ongoing crises, but were seeking to establish a mechanism to prevent future conflicts.

In his recently released report, the UN Secretary-General says that *"there is a reciprocal relationship between human rights and conflict prevention. Violations of human rights are a root cause of conflict; they are also a common consequence of it. It is therefore imperative that resilient national human rights institutions and protection systems be established to safeguard those rights."*

Safeguarding respect for human rights is one of the most fundamental and effective means of preventing conflict. It is not only the right thing to do; it is the wise thing to do. Governments intent on preserving peace, stability and harmonious relationships within the state and with its neighbours, should make every effort to establish a political, institutional and practical framework that ensures respect for the human dignity and rights of all persons. Human rights form an integral part of the comprehensive security architecture shaped by the OSCE already thirty years ago. This meeting today is one building block in that architecture.

The overarching term "universal human rights" includes the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Next week, one of the working sessions will be devoted to this theme. Human rights standards, including minority rights, are one of my most important tools as the High Commissioner tasked with conflict prevention. Everyone has a right to their own identity, which encompasses language, culture and religion, as well as the right to freely participate in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state in which they reside. In essence, minority rights can be described as the right to be different without being discriminated because of those differences. Non-discrimination is therefore the starting-point of minority protection. If however, persons belonging to national minorities are discriminated and threatened because of their ethnic origin, the language they speak or the faith they

practice, then the perceived threat to one's own identity and the sense of alienation and exclusion from society at large are factors that pose a risk of stirring up tensions and may – if not addressed properly – lead to violent conflict within and between States.

This is not to say that a legal framework which protects these rights is all that is needed. It is but the first essential step. The notion of an inclusive society in which all feel valued and accepted involves not only setting out the legal framework but actually getting it implemented through policies promoting equality and combating discrimination. It is in this area of developing policies to promote integration with respect for diversity that my work coincides with the wider debate on integration and migration. Something that will be further discussed during the course of next week. Today, it is enough to remind you of the areas of activity where the HCNM is developing effective methods and broadening expertise, such as policies and practices related to education, language and participation in public life, and more specific fields like media broadcasting and policing.

The second issue highlighted in Secretary-General Annan's report, which I would like to draw attention to is the role of civil society. The Secretary-General writes: "*Another important characteristic of societies that peacefully manage conflict is a vibrant civil society, including non-governmental organizations, free media and active religious leaders.*"

I could not agree more. Throughout the years I have held the post of High Commissioner, I have drawn on the knowledge, experience, resourcefulness and creativity of individuals and organizations that constitute civil society in the countries where I am engaged. A strong and vibrant civil society is an invaluable foundation on which to build democracy, peace, security and economic development. Again, the HDIM demonstrates the strength of civil society in the OSCE region, and as such provides an important opportunity for civil society organizations to meet, share experiences, voice their concerns and hold their governments accountable to the commitments they have made. Governments should welcome an engaged and dedicated civil society, as it ultimately eases the task of governing.

The OSCE has been, and I dare to say, continues to be at the forefront in many respects as a regional security organization. Right from the start, the Helsinki Final Act recognized the interwoven relationship between the human, politico-military, economic and environmental dimensions which are all essential in securing peace, stability and friendly relations between

and within States. Accordingly, this 11th HDIM continues that recognition by providing an annual platform for civil society. As early as 1990, some time before the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities was ready for signature and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities was adopted, the OSCE participating States reaffirmed – as part of universally recognized human rights – respect for the rights of persons belonging to national minorities as being an essential factor for peace, justice, stability and democracy in the participating States and committed to "*protect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities on their territory and create conditions for the promotion of that identity*". And in 1992, the OSCE participating States took the step of establishing the HCNM to serve as an instrument of conflict prevention, acting independently and in confidence.

Today, as a culture of conflict prevention seems to be gaining momentum in the United Nations, the OSCE is looked upon as an organization from which to draw expertise and experience. I firmly believe that the OSCE can contribute valuable insights and provide effective tools with regard to policies and practices of prevention; and can – and should – continue to be at the forefront of finding ways and means to tackle current and future challenges to our common security. The meeting here in Warsaw is a forum in which we can share knowledge and experience and make efforts to improve the implementation of the commitments made in the human dimension.

I thank you.