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Address by Ambassador Christian Strohal,
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions
and Human Rights

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Belgium
Commemorative Ceremony
in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust
January 27, 2006, Egmont Palace



Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to start with the quote from Elie Wiesel: “Not to transmit an experience is to betray it.”

The remembrance of the past and the millions of those who perished in the Holocaust is the least we can do to honour their experience. The memory is what we owe to the victims, survivors, liberators and to ourselves.

While the horrors of the Holocaust must be a lesson to humanity, manifestations of anti-Semitism, hate or intolerance continue to threaten stability and threaten security throughout the OSCE region.

During the last years, a number of countries have seen a rise in anti-Semitism. It was at the Ministerial Council Meetings in Porto 2002 and Maastricht in 2003 that OSCE States decided to take stronger action to combat anti-Semitism. The OSCE conferences on anti-Semitism in Vienna and Berlin in 2003 and 2004 were the first high level conferences by an international organization which here devoted specifically to anti-Semitism. In follow-up to these conferences, OSCE States made a number of further commitments; they include to strengthen educational programmes for combating anti-Semitism and to undertake increased efforts to promote remembrance and education about the tragedy of the Holocaust.

The ODIHR was tasked to assist OSCE States in implementing these commitments. In doing so, our newly established Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Programme at the ODIHR have established close cooperation with other International Organisations and Institutions in the field of Holocaust Education and combating anti-Semitism. In close cooperation with the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, we developed a study that gives an overview and analyzes educational approaches, current initiatives and good practices in the field of Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Education within the OSCE region.

The study shows that 31 out of 55 OSCE participating States have established a Holocaust memorial day. In 18 OSCE participating States, 27 January - the day of the liberation of Auschwitz - has been designated as a Holocaust memorial day. In 13 states, other dates relevant to the Holocaust events of the individual country are designated as Holocaust memorial days.

In October 2002, Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe member states passed a resolution that a “Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and for the prevention of crimes against humanity” should be instituted on the day according to its own experience of history. During its 60th General Assembly plenary meeting in November 2005, the United Nations decided to make 27 January an “International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust”. Recognizing the commitments and the work by the United Nations and the Council of Europe, the

OSCE/ODIHR looks forward to increased collaboration between our institutions in this regard.

The efforts of the international community to remember the Holocaust victims and survivors as well as honour the liberators have been challenged by a resurgence of Holocaust denial and revisionism in parts of the OSCE region. The attempts to deny, revise or minimise are an attack against the values of democratic society. The mix of truth with falsehoods, often anti-Semitic in its nature, distorts history and takes advantage of confused readers and students. Holocaust denial repudiates the history of Europe; it stands against our collective memory. To keep the memory alive, it is important that OSCE states continue their efforts to prevent the uniqueness of the Holocaust from being downplayed and questioned. It is therefore vital for OSCE States to provide today's generation with the ability to comprehend the meaning of the total destruction and the unimaginable harm imposed by humans against humanity.

In order to support the remembrance and Holocaust Education, the ODIHR has collaborated with experts from Yad Vashem and 12 OSCE participating States to develop guidelines for educators to use when preparing Holocaust memorial days. These guidelines are already available in English, French, Russian, Dutch and Italian and are being launched today on the websites of ODIHR and Yad Vashem. The Guidelines were developed as a practical tool for educators in order to support their efforts to plan and organise projects or commemorative events in order to ensure that the memory of the victims of the Holocaust will be maintained and continued in the future.

During 2006, my office will further cooperate with Yad Vashem in expanding the Guidelines to include an additional component dealing with contemporary anti-Semitism which will provide educators with support in addressing such expressions within the classroom.

The ODIHR is also working together with the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam to develop teaching material on anti-Semitism. This material will show how prejudice works and how much it can influence individuals and societies. It will illustrate the common factors in anti-Semitic and other racist remarks and attitudes and will be specifically designed, adopted and translated for each of those countries. We will make this material available at the beginning of the new school year this summer.

The commitments of the OSCE States are clear. They include to provide educational programmes to combat Anti-Semitism and to strengthen the remembrance of the Holocaust. Commitments are only as good as their implementation. Therefore, educators are to be provided with help. We hope that both materials, the guidelines for the commemoration of Holocaust memorial days as well as the teaching material on Anti-Semitism, will serve to educators as practical tools in their work and that the educators will be supported by their governments to use them.

In conclusion I would like to refer to Simon Wiesenthal who said that “the history of man is the history of crimes, and history can repeat. So information is a defense. Through this we can build, we must build, a defense against repetition.” (Simon Wiesenthal, Baltimore Jewish Times, February 24, 1989)

Our (collective) memory is what defines our presence and future. Without the memory of the Holocaust, we will not be able to build democratic and pluralistic societies, where ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity is not only tolerated but also respected and valued.

I thank our Hosts for their invitation and cooperation. My office is looking forward to further strengthen our contribution to this collective effort. I thank you for your attention.