

**OSCE Human Dimension Implementation meeting 2012**

**Canadian Statement for Working Session 10:**

**Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief**

**Monday, 1 October 2012**

Madam Moderator,

Canada welcomes the efforts of the OSCE and encourages participating States to combat all forms of discrimination, including on the basis of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

Canadians enjoy the rights and privileges that come with living in a free and democratic society. We are also keenly aware of the struggles that religious minorities and Human Rights Defenders face today across the OSCE region. As within OSCE participating States, Canada's society continues to evolve, with increasing cultural and religious diversity. We are concerned by all acts of intolerance, incitement, harassment or violence against persons or communities based on ethnic origin or religious belief.

Combating discrimination is a core commitment made by all OSCE participating States. Canada continues to be concerned about the plight of minorities, including the Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities, in the OSCE region. Acts of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and crimes against Christians and members of other religions, whether they be physical attacks or vandalism of religious locations, such as mosques, synagogues, churches or cemeteries, must be condemned.

Canada encourages participating States to continue to move forward with the implementation of existing commitments to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

The Government of Canada is creating a new Office of Religious Freedom within the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade which will promote freedom of religion and conscience as a key objective of Canadian foreign policy. The Office's mandate is to:

- i) defend religious minorities, monitor religious freedom and call attention to the religiously persecuted and condemn their persecutors;
- ii) promote religious freedom as a key objective of foreign policy and encourage greater attention to freedom of religion among the rights enunciated in the

*Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as well as other human rights instruments; and,

- iii) advance policies and programs that support the right to freedom of religion and promote the pluralism that is essential to the development of free and democratic societies.

Madam Moderator,

The issue of freedom of religion and conscience is a matter which Canada takes very seriously. With respect to the OSCE's regional work in protecting and advancing this fundamental freedom, Canada supports the role and efforts of the three OSCE Personal Representatives of the Chairmanship-in-Office on Combatting: Anti-Semitism, Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, and on Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions. We recommend that future OSCE Chairs continue to make good use of these eminent representatives for combating religious and racial intolerance in our region.

Canada also supports the ODIHR Director's initiative to reform and strengthen the Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. This promises to be a valuable tool for OSCE participating States when seeking the assistance and advice of the Panel on new challenges to the freedom of religion or belief of our citizens.

Thank you.