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Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

'Easing the Sisyphus Task: Preventing the Conflicts of the Future'

Speech by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities
Max van der Stoel

At the Verleihung des Hessichen Friedenspreises

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Mr. Chairman,
Mr. President
Dr. Vranitzky,
Dr. Czempiel,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much. I am honored to receive this prestigous prize.

I see this award as recognition of the importance of preventing inter-ethnic conflict. Usually conflict prevention doesn't make the headlines. If conflict prevention is successful, there is no conflict and therefore no news. I hope that I have been able to prevent some headlines in the past few years.

Sadly, we still have plenty of bad news when it comes to inter-ethnic conflict. I would like to use this occasion to reflect on some of the lessons learned from the past decade and to reflect on the challenges of preventing conflict in the future.

A significant achievement of the past few years has been the elevation of human rights up the political agenda. A subject once scarcely discussed is now a key consideration in international relations and domestic politics. In the past ten years, international standards to protect minority rights have been elaborated in detail, for example in the OSCE Copenhagen Document and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

There is a growing sense that human rights must be protected, if not by the State concerned then by the international community. The OSCE is very clear on this point. In 1991, OSCE participating States agreed in Moscow that "commitments undertaken in the human dimension of the [O]SCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned." This has allowed the OSCE, including my office, to be legitimately and constructively engaged in various situations within a number of States on issues relating to the protection of human rights including minority rights. We must stick to this principle. Human rights *are* everybody's business. This is true from a moral, legal, and security point of view. In this modern world, no State can hide behind its borders and abuse the rights of its people: the consequences affect us all.

This sentiment was strongly felt by a number of European States in the early 1990s when violent conflicts threatened security within and between former Communist countries. In 1992 the OSCE decided to create the post of High Commissioner on National Minorities. The idea of the mandate is to provide early action and early warning on issues relating to tensions involving national minorities.

In carrying out this mandate I have traveled extensively to the Baltic States, Central Asia, Ukraine, Central Europe, and the Balkans, particularly Macedonia. During these visits I obtained first hand information about developments affecting inter-ethnic relations, I discussed these issues with the parties involved, and I tried to promote dialogue and co-operation between them. In some cases I wrote recommendations on how I thought that the situation of minorities could be improved, both according to international law and bearing in mind political realities. My approach has been discreet, partly because my mandate required it, but also because I felt that there was no point in sensationalizing already fragile situations. Working in confidence, the parties were more likely to open up to me – and to each other.

I would like to draw a number of conclusions from my work.

The first and most important point is the need for early warning and early action. I think that we have enough evidence that timely and effective action can help to avert a costly crisis. Instead of hindsight that says that "we should have seen it coming" and post-conflict rehabilitation that pours billions of dollars into reconstruction, we should have more foresight and investment – particularly political capital – when it comes to preventing conflicts.

In this Information Age, there is an abundance of material to keep us up-to-date on developments around the world. There is no shortage of early warning. And yet, people – notably politicians – have a tendency only to react to what is on the screen in front of them. By then it is often too late.

Take the case of Macedonia. For years I have been stressing that the situation there is fragile and that the multi-ethnic State had wobbly foundations. But people were focused on other developments in the region - Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro - and were apparently not able to pay attention to an urgent, yet not so obvious, danger in Macedonia. In Macedonia itself, the need for dialogue on inter-ethnic issues did not get the necessary attention. Only when the pots began to boil did the cooks run into the kitchen.

This highlights a dilemma which I have often encountered in my work. On the one hand, the best time for solving a dispute is before it has escalated into a violent conflict. On the other hand, until there are dramatic developments people do not think that the problem requires serious attention.

Crisis management and post conflict rehabilitation *are* vital. But they would not be so necessary if we invested more in preventing conflicts. After all, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. This means putting more resources into conflict prevention at the national and international level. For example, much can be done in terms of specific tension reducing projects, institutional capacity-building, or in supporting development projects that can

reduce the likelihood of minority disaffection. These investments require only modest sums, but the dividends can be great.

A second key consideration is to tackle "root causes". While being sensitive to questions of culture, history and symbolism, one must try to get down to the core of issues in dispute. That is why I have tried to get the parties to be specific, to spell out their concerns and to look at co-operative and constructive solutions to their problems.

In this context, it is important for all parties to realize that while certain basic standards must be maintained, political solutions require compromise. Parties that take a maximalist approach often meet maximum opposition. Long-term solutions are best achieved through a pragmatic step-by-step approach grounded in politically possible objectives.

Dialogue can be a catalyst for change. That leads me to a third general observation namely that inter-ethnic tensions often stem from a lack of communication. Dialogue is an important process for dispelling misperceptions and building confidence between the parties. It should not only occur during crisis situations. It should be part of the normal discourse. Sometimes it takes a third party to help to initiate this process and/or move it along. I have been able to play that role in several OSCE countries. But ultimately it is up to the parties to eventually find ways of facilitating their own means of communication on a permanent basis.

A fourth observation is that effective participation of national minorities in public life is an essential component of a peaceful society. Sometimes minorities feel left out of decisions that affect them or feel alienated from the society in which they live. Through effective participation in decision-making processes and bodies, representatives of minorities have the possibility to present their views to the authorities. This can help the authorities to understand minorities' concerns. At the same time the authorities are offered a platform to explain their policies and intentions. This can contribute to a more co-operative and less confrontational situation. It can increase the minority's sense of belonging, and reduce the fears and prejudices of the majority.

Why is this so important? The answer is obvious. The failure to integrate usually leads to disintegration. Wars in the former Yugoslavia give clear warnings about the cancer of intolerance in multi-ethnic societies. Such conflicts feature grave violations of human rights, the systematic exclusion and suppression of one or several groups by another. In some cases marginalization spawns frustration. In others, difference is perceived as threat, and the threat is confronted by violence. This phenomena are not limited to the Balkans. Xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and extreme nationalism are alive and well throughout Europe.

Some people, particularly extreme nationalists, argue that inter-ethnic conflicts demonstrate that multi-ethnic States are not viable; only nation-States can be strong. I have

noted that even among some liberal commentators there is a growing sense of fatalism surrounding the future of multi-ethnic States.

But where does this leave us? If we are to have a Europe where every nation has "its own" State, we would have an endless redrawing of boundaries, a steady stream of population transfers, and people living in culturally exclusive environments. This is neither viable nor desirable.

So what is the alternative?

First of all we must be clear that ethnically pure nation-States are not the norm and efforts to create them usually cause conflict. Bearing that in mind, we must appreciate the fact that multi-ethnic States are a reality and that cultural diversity can be a source of strength. I agree that keeping multi-ethnic States together after a conflict has broken out is a Sisyphus task. That is why we must prevent violent conflict from breaking out in the first place. Furthermore, I believe that there *are* ways of preventing the nationalist stone from always rolling back on us.

A major consideration is to create a strong legal framework that protects the rights of everyone, including persons belonging to national minorities. Minorities must be given an opportunity to protect and promote their identities, for example their language, symbols and culture. Within the framework of a democratic State based on the rule of law, this should not create a threat to the majority. Indeed, the more integrated minorities are within the State, the better the chance that they will feel at home.

In some cases self-governance can satisfy the minority's desire for greater control over its own destiny without breaking up States. Through various forms of so-called 'internal' self-determination, minorities can decide on and administer those aspects of their lives which concern them alone, or predominantly. This may be achieved through regimes of territorial autonomy where minorities are concentrated. Where minorities are dispersed, regimes of personal autonomy or cultural autonomy may be a solution. Such autonomies should not be confused with separatism, since they rely upon common understandings and shared institutions of rule of law, respect for human rights, common security and destiny within the State.

These lessons have yet to be satisfactorily learned. Recent developments in Macedonia, outbreaks of violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, fighting in the Presevo valley, simmering tensions in Kosovo, populist appeals to nationalism, the threat of religious extremism in Central Asia, and terrorism by separatist groups in a number of OSCE States all paint a gloomy picture.

And yet, over the past decade positive developments *have* been made. They are not as eye-catching, but they are equally, if not more, important. International standards

concerning minority rights are now well established and their implementation closely monitored. Many countries in the OSCE area now have an institutionalized means of dialogue where minorities have a voice; more States are enacting minority rights legislation; some Governments have introduced reforms - for example in public administration and education - that are sensitive to minority interests. Bilateral treaties and dialogue have reduced suspicions among neighboring States that minorities can be a Trojan Horse.

For their part, minorities in many OSCE States have seen the merits of dialogue and participation and realize that compromise can bear more fruits than confrontation. Some of these changes have been the result of international pressure. But I think that there is also an increased understanding by Governments, and minority representatives, that addressing minority concerns is simply good governance.

I am under no illusions that all inter-ethnic conflicts can be solved. However, I do not believe inter-ethnic conflict is inevitable. We now have a better understanding of why conflicts erupt and how they can be prevented. Standards are in place to protect minority rights and there is a growing 'toolbox' of techniques to prevent conflict. We still need to do a lot more in terms of investing in conflict prevention, acting on the signs of early warning, and shoring up the foundations of multi-ethnic States. In this way we can build peace within States and peace between States. The last century, in deed the last decade, has given us enough warning of what happens when we fail.

Thank you for your attention and thank you again for the high honor that you have bestowed upon me.