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Irish Presidency of the European Union

OSCE Conference on anti-Semitism

Session 2:

The Role of Governments and Civil Society in Promoting Tolerance

The European Union was pleased to join consensus on an OSCE decision tasking ODIHR to continue its important work in gathering statistics on anti-Semitism in the whole OSCE region. Statistics provide Governments with evidence that a problem exists; however they do not offer solutions to that problem. Dialogue between different faith groups and race communities to promote understanding and reduce intolerance is the most effective solution to dealing with anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance. I will therefore begin by proposing as the EU's key recommendation to this session, that while ODIHR should gather and disseminate statistics on anti-Semitism, it should promote, as the next step, dialogue as the key to addressing it.

There are many good examples of how interfaith and intercultural dialogue exists today across the whole region, and especially within the European Union. ODIHR could be tasked, as part of its wider intolerance remit, to gather information on these examples and study how they could best be applied to manifestations of anti-Semitism that emerge from their data collection activities. OSCE meetings themselves could be used as forums for interfaith dialogue.

Anti-Semitism must be fought not only by Jewish people, but also by Muslims, Christians and those of other faiths. This is true for all other forms of intolerance. We can only build a society in which prejudice, victimisation and intolerance are unacceptable for all communities, not just our own. We are all equally responsible.

If anti-Semitism is viewed as a destructive factor in relations between communities, it is important to offer alternative positive discourses for people to buy into. Dialogue and co-operation can counter myths and stereotypes, prevent hostility and also serve as a basis for conflict management if hostility does arise. While respecting its unique characteristics, the fight against anti-Semitism should be undertaken in the wider context of fighting racism and xenophobia in a contemporary world. Bringing together the various minority communities and faith groups with the common aim of creating a fairer and more tolerant society can only strengthen the cause of each community.

It is important for communities to find practical issues they have in common, and to address these issues together. Religious freedom, religious slaughter, anti-racism, challenging extremists and the role of the family are all examples of common ground that could be tackled by different faith groups working together. But it is equally important for people of different religions and races to understand and respect each other's differences, not to fear or hate them for being different.

In its recent report studying manifestations of anti-Semitism in the EU during 2002 and 2003, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) encouraged religious communities, NGOs and other organisations to develop interfaith and intercultural dialogue through specific initiatives at local, national and European level. It recommended that such initiatives should be encouraged and actively supported by the Member States and the European Commission. The European Union is keen to facilitate and encourage the significant number of bodies that are involved in developing these dialogues on a number of levels.

In October last year, the Italian Presidency of the European Union, brought together Home Affairs ministers from governments across Europe with senior representatives of faith communities. The meeting addressed inter-faith dialogue as an element of social cohesion in Europe and as an instrument of peace in the Mediterranean area.

Concern about the reported rise in anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Europe following the September 11 atrocities led the European Commission and the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia to organise a series of Round Tables on these themes in late 2003 and early 2004. The three meetings

successfully brought together leading experts from around Europe to look at practical ways of combating discrimination and encouraging dialogue and co-operation between ethnic and religious groups. On initiative of the European Commission President, a seminar took place on 19 February 2004 on: "Europe against anti-Semitism, for a Union of Diversity", with more than 1,000 participants thus contributing to increasing understanding and achieving overall positive and concrete results.

These examples, and others, show that the European Union is committed to fighting anti-Semitism and all other forms of intolerance in a practical and comprehensive manner. Indeed, the only thing that will not be tolerated is intolerance itself.

The Acceding Countries Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia and the Candidate Countries Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey align themselves with this statement.