

OSCE CONFERENCE ON ANTI-SEMITISM Vienna, 19 – 20 June 2003

ENGLISH only

**Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office,
Ambassador Daan Everts**

OPENING SPEECH ANTI-SEMITISM CONFERENCE

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Today we witness an important event in the history of the OSCE and I am greatly honoured to address such a large and distinguished audience on behalf of the Chairman-in-Office, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The fact that so many participants have come to Vienna to attend this meeting clearly demonstrates the importance of the subject - anti-Semitism, and the necessity to fight it.

At the Ministerial Council of the OSCE in Porto, last year, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the OSCE participating States urged in their decision on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination the convening of separately designated human dimension events on issues addressed in that decision, including on the topics of anti-Semitism, discrimination and racism and xenophobia. This conference is the first of these events, to be followed in September by another conference, on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination. All these issues will again receive special attention during the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw in October. This shows that the OSCE takes the rise of intolerance which we witness in our world today very serious.

It is certainly not the first time that the CSCE and OSCE have condemned anti-Semitism and as long as it is necessary it will continue to do so. This is the first time, however, that a conference especially devoted to anti-Semitism takes place in the framework of the OSCE. That such a meeting is necessary, is in itself deplorable, but we would be amiss not to recognize that indeed the necessity still exists. For this reason we are here together today and tomorrow and I hope that our meeting will not lack its desired impact.

Anti-Semitism is of all ages, has occurred in many different geographical areas and has taken many shapes and forms. What happened in the course of the last century – the almost unimaginable in terms of human brutality - cannot and should never be forgotten. It has shown to what depths mankind can sink when it starts believing in racial superiority. The fate of the six million Jews who died in the course of the Second World War exclusively on account of race, will always remind us of the necessity to stand up against anti-Semitism, whenever it raises its ugly head again.

But anti-Semitism is not limited to 20th Century programs, and ghettos and the ultimate evil of Auschwitz, Treblinka or Sobibor. Anti-Semitism existed long before the Holocaust and in many different countries. It took violent forms at times, and more subtle ones on other occasions. It is shocking to have to acknowledge that it has shamelessly recurred after the Holocaust up to this very day and may even be on the rise, as witnessed by recent instances of anti-Semitism. They may range from anti-semitic slogans on the football-field, desecration of Jewish cemeteries and memorials to attacks on synagogues and, not to forget, hate mail on the Internet – the latest cross border and therefore very disconcerting manifestation of anti-Semitism. All this occurring in the year 2003, in various parts of the OSCE-area and I am not excluding my own country, the Netherlands. It would be a grave mistake to ignore or belittle

this, in the hope that it will prove to be of an ephemeral nature. We have seen to what that - ultimately - might lead.

For anti-Semitism is not just a number of incidents - it is a state of mind. It cannot be discarded as something belonging only to a lunatic fringe of society. Anti-Semitism has deep roots and we should not delude ourselves in thinking that anti-Semitism cannot occur in democratic societies, which adhere to the rule of law, implement their obligations under OSCE, UN, Council of Europe etc. Probably none of our States is fully exempt of it.

This brings us to the question: why is this so? What is the reason - or the reasons - that anti-Semitism is a recurring evil through the ages? Over time many explanations have been offered, none of the satisfactory and many morally unacceptable:

Is anti-Semitism perhaps the result of racist theories, the belief in "superior" and "inferior" races? In the twentieth century such racism led indeed to the wanton annihilation of millions - not only of Jews but also of Roma and Sinti and others stigmatized as inferior - but as explanation it will not suffice. The underlying racist theories in fact stem only from the nineteenth century and anti-Semitism is much older than that.

Does anti-Semitism have its roots in religious intolerance? It is true that, even though the times of the Wars of Religion are - at least in Europe - now in the past, religious intolerance still exists today - and not only directed at the Jewish faith. In fact, we have seen a recent rise in religious extremism. Religious arguments have at times indeed played a role in fostering anti-Semitism, but in many countries that do witness anti-semitic incidents today, religion does no longer play the role that it did in past ages.

Is anti-Semitism the result of fear for a "Jewish Conspiracy" to rule the world? That nefarious nineteenth century forgery, the "Protocols of the Elders Men of Sion", tried to tell us so, and unfortunately they have even been reprinted in our times. But again, anti-Semitism is much older and such theories could only exist because at a certain moment they fell on fertile ground - not the other way round. It is doubtful if they still play a role of importance in the world of today. They certainly do not explain anti-Semitism through the ages and in all its forms.

Is it because the Jews cherished their own identity, stuck to their faith, refused to totally assimilate? The history of the Jewish people throughout the diaspora is certainly amazing in many ways and proves the strength of that faith and those traditions. But on the other hand their contribution in the fields of culture, science, commerce and politics made them a vital and integral part of the societies they live in. Yet, anti-Semitism is often also directed at them.

Are we to look at social-economic causes? Are we to think of the false picture of the Jewish money lender, the Jewish capitalist, when looking at the causes of anti-Semitism? It may be that it played a role in the past, that Shakespeare's Shylock was once seen as the prototype of The Jew - but in today's world it will not suffice as an explanation. Even in the past it must have been obvious that one cannot project the image of an individual on to a community at large - then and now - is anything but uniform in professional, economic and social terms.

Then we have the explanation, often heard nowadays, that present day anti-Semitism is a result of the Middle East conflict. I am sure that some recent incidents are linked to Israeli policies. We should not make the mistake, however, to confuse anti-Semitism and political criticism of the policies of the State of Israel. Whatever is thought on this issue - anti-Semitism existed already long before the state of Israel came into existence. In fact, there are many conflicts in this world, also conflicts which are based on ethnic lines, with racist undertones, but they never

have led to widespread aggression directed at specific groups of people outside the countries directly involved. And let us be wary of confusing anti-Semitism and political criticism of the policies of the State of Israel.

All elements mentioned have been given as explanations for anti-Semitism in the course of the years, yes of centuries. They are not an adequate, and most of them clearly not an acceptable, explanation as to why anti-Semitism still exists and, worse, why we witness even a rise in anti-Semitic incidents today. Some have suggested it is because anti-Semitism is a convenient way for young hooligans to shock and provoke. It would be a tragic irony indeed, if because of a history of anti-Semitism the Jewish people have become the easy, readily found target for racist behaviour, irrespective of the source of discontent.

In conclusion I am inclined to state that there is no useable explanation of anti-Semitism and that we would do better to simply acknowledge the evil of its existence and the necessity to fight it anywhere and anytime it recurs. And hence it is important that the OSCE, like other international organisations, pays attention to this form of racism and discrimination - as it must do to all violations of human rights. It should raise the awareness of our citizens and encourage specific measures as well as general educational efforts. As a matter of immediate urgency it should help address the abuse of new technology in spreading racial hatred. The recent phenomenon of hate-mongering emails, often of an anti-Semitic nature, on the Internet is particularly poisonous. It is my sincere hope that this conference will give new impetus to the fight against anti-Semitism - also as part of a wider fight against racism, discrimination and xenophobia - and come up with concrete, practical recommendations on how the OSCE might contribute to this.

But the OSCE is not more than its participating States. Implementation of what is being discussed here today and tomorrow will remain the obligation of these individual States. But anti-Semitism has to do with the minds of people. It is there that the struggle has to be won. In this respect NGO's - and many of them are fortunately represented here - also have an important role to play. Not only to draw the attention to occurrences of anti-Semitism - though this is certainly necessary. But also to assist in promoting that change of mind that will help to stamp out anti-Semitism as well as other forms of racism and xenophobia.

This, then, is the task of every single one of us. And here let me quote what Mrs. Laura Bush said earlier this month at the 10th Anniversary of the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the opening of the exhibition "Anne Frank the Writer: An Unfinished Story". She said: "These sites and the writings of Anne Frank remind us of the power of hate and the need to end discrimination in the world. Anne Frank wrote that we must hold onto our ideals in the face of prejudice. Each of us can fight hate by educating ourselves and others about discrimination.(...) We can condemn acts of hatred and we can teach others that every person deserves respect. When we fight prejudice, we strengthen our democracy."

Like I stated at the beginning - this is the first time that the OSCE devotes a conference specially to the issue of anti-Semitism. It may be regretted that it is still, in the year 2003, necessary to do so. But it also shows that the OSCE-community is willing to jointly take up the gauntlet and fight it.

I wish you a fruitful conference.