

Statement by The Honourable John Baird, M.P.
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada

ENGLISH only

18th Meeting of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Ministerial Council
(Vilnius, Lithuania - Tuesday, December 6th, 2011 - Plenary Session)

- Mr. Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen;
- Pleased to be with you. And a special thanks to the distinguished Foreign Minister of Lithuania for his great work and hospitality.
- Since the time of this organization's founding, we have made great strides in delivering on the goal of building a trans-continental community of nations that is free, democratic, and at peace - "from Vancouver to Vladivostok." We are not there yet, but more states than ever and more multilateral organizations than ever are committed partners in this endeavour.
- Canada will continue to work with and within these partnerships to promote the respect of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.
- As peace-loving countries committed to security, we can all agree: we include many ethnicities, but we share one humanity.
- I am therefore pleased to report that Canada will be creating an Office of Religious Freedom. The Office will promote freedom of religion and belief - and the ability to practice one's religion - as key objectives of Canada's foreign policy.
- 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. This despite the best intentions of participating States and counter to our shared beliefs. Canada feels it is our duty to uphold the rights of the afflicted and to give voice to the voiceless.
- Just 170 kilometers from here, the authorities in Minsk continue to restrict the rights and freedoms of Belarus citizens. Canada unequivocally condemns the current Belarusian government for its clear disregard of its international commitments and standards for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.
- We deeply regret the forced closure earlier this year by Belarus of the OSCE Office in Minsk; well before its work was completed.

- Canada will continue to work with other international partners and organizations to ensure that the people of Belarus can exercise their fundamental rights.

- We are pleased that Belarus NGOs, many of who are now in exile, were able to take part in the pre-Ministerial NGO Forums in Vilnius so that their voices were heard.

Mr. Chair,

- Canada strongly supports Mongolia's candidacy to the OSCE. We look forward to a positive decision on this here in Vilnius.

- We also need to take steps to ensure that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is not allowed under law. It is unacceptable that people in the OSCE region can still be attacked and imprisoned simply for their sexual orientation.

- In Vilnius, you can count on Canada's continued support for your hard work and efforts to adopt some meaningful outcomes.

- It is Canada's sincere hope we can work together on those in the months and years to come.

- Thank you / Merci!