

MC.DEL/65/07
30 November 2007

ENGLISH
Original: ENGLISH/FRENCH

**STATEMENT BY MR. KAREL DE GUCHT,
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF BELGIUM, AT THE
FIFTEENTH MEETING OF THE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL**

Madrid, 29 November 2007

In taking the floor, I wish to express my sincere thanks to the Chairmanship for the quality of its hospitality here in Madrid. I know from recent experience how demanding the exercise of the Chairmanship of the OSCE is politically and how taxing it is from a logistical point of view. You, Mr. Chairman, and your team, can count on our full support for the success of this meeting.

This Ministerial Council meeting is, as far as we are concerned, the last one in which Belgium has the honour to participate as a member of the Troika. This experience of three years was for us valuable and stimulating. It allowed us to get a better, and even more so, a more concrete grasp of the new pan-European reality of a continent which has, so to speak, outgrown its geographical boundaries to acquire a new Euro-Asiatic dimension alongside the traditional Euro-Atlantic one which was bequeathed upon us by virtue of history. This experience has helped us to better take account of what I would call the constitutive diversity of the OSCE membership. The role of the OSCE is to contribute to the overall stability of the continent by uniting member States around common values while providing for the legitimate expression of their diversity. Unity of purpose among 56 States not being synonymous with unity of perception, this is a challenging task indeed; a task which also calls for humility and mutual respect for individual identities. This holds true if only because the OSCE forms a multilayered whole in which the EU is not equal to Europe, any more than NATO is equal to the West, or the CIS to the East.

Mr. Chairman,

The principal role of the OSCE today is to manage diversity while preserving the groundwork of values that we have in common precisely because they transcend historical, cultural or political contingencies, and indeed even the inevitable conflicts of interest that can sometimes divide us. Our three years as part of the Troika leave me with no illusions about the difficulty of the task.

I had occasion to say during our Chairmanship that it was easy, and frequently unjust, to criticize the OSCE for its failings. I shall accordingly avoid doing that today — though my reticence is certainly not intended to suggest that everything is for the best; far from it. Nor should it be taken to mean that we need have no worries about the future of an organization in which frustration has become an almost daily experience for those who follow our work and which, among others, arouses largely indifference or scepticism. The Chairmanship is only too aware of this.

While it is neither surprising nor even new, this observation is nonetheless worrying and harmful to the credibility of our work. For example, it is not normal that for five years now we have been unable to come to agreement on a Ministerial Declaration. Whatever the issues that divide us — and I have no intention of denying their importance, especially insofar as they concern interests regarded as being of superior importance — the absence of an agreed Declaration at the ministerial level ultimately devalues what we agree upon, or could agree upon with a minimum of goodwill. And in the final analyses, it is this that I am calling for today. We are certainly not in agreement on everything, far from it, but this does not mean that we should agree on nothing.

The evolution we have witnessed for several years or, more precisely still, the absence of progress on a number of sensitive points necessarily leads to an erosion of our commitments and casts doubt on the *acquis*. The last point is of particular concern to me.

We are concerned first and foremost with the human dimension, together with the promotion of fundamental freedoms without which the concept of governance is meaningless. Unanimity with regard to principles is not as evident as it should be when it comes to implementation. This hiatus is not really surprising given the diversity of situations of which I have spoken, but, be that as it may, it sometimes makes you wonder whether we are still in agreement, not just on matters of practical action but also on the essential points, which is even more serious.

By the same token, one knows that there can be no democracy without free elections. Accordingly, in a spirit of transparency and mutual aid this last point has every relevance, and we have all accepted the principle of opening up our elections to international observation on the basis of transparent, objective and scientific criteria. One can certainly discuss the observation methodology, and indeed we have never ceased to do this, among other things on the basis of a report by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) appropriately entitled “common responsibility”. This report stresses that the strengthening of election observation activities should in fact be a shared responsibility between governments and institutions. It was welcomed at the Ministerial Council meeting in Brussels as an indispensable paper. The desire of the Belgian Chairmanship was that it should have been possible on this basis to open a new chapter of greater consensus on the question of election observation. This is clearly not — or not yet — the case, but it is, however, something we must return to if we seriously want to defend the principle of election observation which, according to our belief at all events, is not limited merely to observing the actual voting but extends to the entire electoral process and can therefore be a lengthy procedure. The ODIHR therefore has its place in this process, it being understood, naturally, that the practical modalities of observation must be agreed upon with the host country but also that these conditions must obviously be such as to permit objective and credible observation. This was, among other things, the objective of the report to which I have just made reference, and I believe that it has to remain a basis for every consideration of this subject, in particular with regard to everything that concerns observation methodology. Furthermore, I believe, contrary to what one sometimes hears, that the presence of the ODIHR provides the best guarantee of an observation as apolitical as possible. The essential thing, at this stage, regardless of the incidents involved in the organization of any observation — for all such exercises constitute particular cases — is to ensure that the observation is conducted under conditions that guarantee its credibility.

Another concern is the erosion of the arms control regime currently in force, a regime to which the OSCE has greatly contributed. The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) today still constitutes the foundation of military stability and of stability full stop. This does not mean that the Treaty should not be adapted to take into account a military-strategic context which does not have much in common with that of the 1990s. We have noted Russia's concerns regarding the CFE Treaty and these merit our attention. Still, we first have to preserve the basis of a regime that has served us well and whose durability is a guarantee for the future of us all. Belgium supports the discussions under way on this subject in the hope that they will lead, in all relevant cases, to consensus on the preservation of a viable arms control regime which Europe cannot do without.

Lastly, I should like to say a few words about Kosovo, which, at this stage, constitutes a subject of serious concern. Regardless of the outcome of the negotiations in progress and the form of solution or the absence of a consensual solution, it is essential that the OSCE, which has done a great deal — with notable success — for the protection of minorities and assistance in the development of democratic institutions, should be able to continue fulfilling its mission, which I consider to be crucial for regional stability and the well-being of the population.

I have limited myself to raising only these three particular concerns, namely the CFE Treaty, the role of the ODIHR and the future of the OSCE in Kosovo, because, given the circumstances, I regard them as priorities. Furthermore, I believe it is our duty to do everything possible to preserve the OSCE acquis. This is the price we must pay if we wish to secure the future.

As for the rest of our concerns, Belgium, which had focused its own Chairmanship on the principle of continuity, is committed to continuing with the agenda adopted in Brussels. I note with satisfaction that Spain has worked with this in mind and that progress has been made in regional co-operation and in the area of transport as well as in the fight against organized crime or, indeed, in matters concerned with trafficking in human beings and the sexual exploitation of children. I also welcome the intensification of our partnership relations, in particular with our Asian partners, with whom Belgium has been particularly involved during the course of this year.

I must, however, note at the end of this brief overview that some important issues remain open or controversial, for example with regard to civil society and the protection of human rights defenders, areas in which we support the efforts of the Chairmanship and in which we should like to see progress made.

I should like to conclude my statement by saying that I hope to see the Chairmanship crowned by the efforts it has tirelessly made in the course of this year.