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OSCE Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination

EU intervention in session 2: the Role of Governments and Civil Society in promoting Tolerance

We are all fully aware of the utmost importance of building tolerant societies, based on democratic principles, the rule of law and respect for one another. Governments and civil society have a prominent role to play in tackling expressions of racism, xenophobia and discrimination which have developed in our region and world-wide. Racism, xenophobia and discrimination and all forms of intolerance, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, must have as their natural enemies a free, vigilant and active civil society, ready to share information and co-operate. The EU therefore welcomes the fact that this conference has as one of its objectives the re-inforcing of the partnership between government and civil society.

Linking this session to the previous discussion on legal measures, the European Union fully recognises that laws alone do not prevent racism. Effective engagement by civil society is crucial to the success of our struggle against racism, xenophobia and discrimination. Legal measures must be complemented by concrete programmes and projects that increase the capacity of civil society to combat racism, xenophobia, intolerance and anti-ethnic attitudes and draw the broader community into the coalition against them.

The EU has a strong track record of promoting civil dialogue in the employment and social field. It provides core funding to the European Network Against Racism and a number of other NGO networks, in order to allow them to bring together their members to work on discrimination-related issues at the European level.

To support efforts at national and European level to combat discrimination (including the implementation of European anti-discrimination legislation) the European Union has launched an Action Programme to combat discrimination and its underlying causes. The 6-year Programme finances studies and cross-border projects aimed at tackling discrimination and raising awareness. It also finances the capacity building of networks of people and organisations across the EU to share information, especially as regards good practices.

Government action sets the tone for more extensive activities in the rest of society. I will give the example of the fight against Islamophobia. Following the events of September 11, the EU, through its Member States and as an institution, in its own right acted and will continue to act to counter incidents of violence and discrimination against citizens who are members or are perceived to be members of the Muslim community in the EU. This includes, in particular, specific documentation of Islamophobic incidents and action across a broad range of areas from law enforcement to education. In this light, the EU acknowledges the important contribution made in the immediate aftermath of September 11 by the City of New York itself, by setting an example of tolerance and pre-empting any attempt to stigmatise the Arab community because of the action of a few individuals filled with hate and evil. I quote from Mayor Giuliani's contribution to the OSCE's anti-Semitism conference as I believe that it serves as a living example of effective political leadership to support tolerance and draw in the broader community to unite against intolerance:

"On September 11, when we were attacked in a horrific and terrible way (...), my thoughts immediately turned to the possibility that there would be a significant reaction on the part of New Yorkers against people who are Arab, or appeared Arab. That would be just a terrible example for us to set, having just been victimized."

This action was backed by improved statistical data collection and co-ordination between law enforcement and municipal government, and can equally apply to other manifestations of racist violence.

The EU also encourages the hosting of events that support inter-cultural understanding among its various communities, which can be of particular value in the struggle against discriminatory prejudices and attitudes. The EU has organised round tables at the national and European level to bring communities together. From December 2002 through to March 2003, the European Commission in co-operation with the EU's Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, held three such Round Tables on anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and intercultural co-operation to address interfaith and intercultural issues. Based on these experiences, we should promote OSCE region-wide events bringing national level mechanisms to combat racism together in order to exchange experience and share best practice.

Let me recall, in this context, that the EU welcomes the on-going elaboration of an OSCE Roma and Sinti Action Plan. We believe that this Conference can provide useful inputs for the Action Plan, as could do the discussions in Strasbourg on a possible European Roma Forum.

The EU believes that time has come to take stock of existing initiatives and developments on racism, xenophobia and discrimination, identify effective action and share best practices among participating states and make this available to the OSCE human dimension institutions. This can be supported through enhanced co-operation between the relevant mechanisms of the EU, the Council of Europe and the OSCE.

In the EU and in other participating states of the OSCE special bodies have been established to combat racism or promote human rights. A key task of these organisations is to monitor the situation, to draw the attention of governments to areas of concern, to identify good practices both from government and civil society, and to conduct various activities in support of intercultural understanding and co-operation

and in favour of multi-ethnic coexistence. The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, established in Vienna, carries out these important activities at an EU-level. The Monitoring Centre works closely with the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and supports the work of the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Ways to extend this co-operation to the OSCE's human dimension institutions should be examined by all these bodies.

The European Conference against Racism held in Strasbourg on 6 October, 2000 encouraged governments to develop, in consultation with civil society, national action plans against racism. The EU believes that the most effective follow-up in this area should involve action at the national and regional levels to tackle contemporary racism and to promote a fair and inclusive society. The EU therefore also draws attention to the forthcoming UNHCHR Regional Seminar on Implementation of Conclusions of the World Conference against Racism (Durban 2001), which will take place in Prague on 24-26 September, 2003.

Governments cannot fight racism xenophobia and discrimination by legislation alone, the EU has long recognised this. Racism, xenophobia and discrimination as well as their related violence are social problems and all of society must unite in fighting it.

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