

Statement by Ambassador Aleksi Härkönen on behalf of Finland

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on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding

Madame Chair

It is my pleasure to address this conference on behalf of the Finnish delegation. Finland joined the statement issued by the EU yesterday but I would like to add few comments, also from the point of view of the incoming chairmanship-in-office. I would like to congratulate Romania, our new EU partner on hosting this OSCE High Level Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding. Also the Spanish Chairmanship deserves special appreciation for the preparations of this conference.

Combating intolerance and discrimination in all its forms remains a continuous challenge and requires tireless commitment and active, targeted measures from our governments. It is closely related to the protection and promotion of human rights of minorities. The OSCE has developed efficient tools for dealing with this important issue. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) plays a significant role in the work of promoting tolerance and countering discrimination in general. The High Commissioner on national minorities tackles issues in his mandate. Also the work of the personal representatives of the Chairman-in-Office in combating intolerance constitutes an important part of the overall OSCE efforts.

Finland emphasizes the special need to enhance the protection of the rights of persons facing multiple discrimination and hate crimes motivated on multiple grounds, including race, colour, sex, language, religion, belief, national or social origin. Especially women belonging to minorities or persons with disabilities may encounter multiple discrimination.

Finland stresses the importance of ensuring the fullest possible synergy effects of work against racism, xenophobia and discrimination carried out at different international fora, including at the UN, and commends the work of the Alliance of Civilizations.

In order to achieve concrete results, strengthening the capacity of civil society and awareness raising through different media and education are essential tools in tackling intolerance and discrimination. Particular attention should be paid to the youth in order to foster more tolerant future generations.

I would like to assure the participants of this conference that Finland is fully committed to carrying forward the work against anti-Semitism, islamofobia, as well as racial and other forms of discrimination and intolerance during our upcoming OSCE chairmanship in 2008.

One of the achievements in promoting the rights of minorities and combating discrimination has been the adoption in 2003 of the Action Plan on improving the situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE area. Finland believes that a review of its implementation is timely and we could consider making it one of our priorities next year. Such an effort could include cooperation with the Council of Europe, and also involving the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF). We note with satisfaction the work of ODIHR on Roma and Sinti issues, also aiming to assist participating states in the implementation of the Action Plan.

Tolerance, mutual understanding, equality and respect for one another are the cornerstones of free and democratic societies. Multiculturalism is a resource that brings dynamism and energy to the society as a whole. Such valuable energy should not be overlooked or wasted. Instead, it should be carefully utilized by ensuring adequate participation of different groups in decision-making affecting them and, thus, contributing to more inclusive societies where universal human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected and promoted.

Madam Chair, this conference offers and has already offered an excellent opportunity to review the implementation of our commitments with regard to promotion of tolerance, non-discrimination, mutual respect and understanding, and to enhance our cooperation in these issues.