

OSCE CONFERENCE ON COMBATING DISCRIMINATION AND PROMOTING MUTUAL RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING

Plenary Session 6

UK Delegation Joanna Chellapermal (CSW)

Thank you Mr. Chairman,

I am speaking on behalf of CSW, a Christian human rights NGO working for freedom of thought, religion and belief. I wish to briefly highlight three issues:

Firstly, we commend the Turkish government in taking prompt action to arrest those responsibilities for killing of Christian pastors. However, we note with concern the negative and inflammatory reporting on religious minorities in media which is creating intolerance in attitude and action within the Turkish society. We ask the government to promote tolerance towards religious minorities in media and education sectors through programmes and events.

Secondly, on a more general issue of freedom of thought and belief: at the Civil Society Preparatory meeting, there was a clear demand that violations of freedom of thought and belief should be addressed as fundamental human rights violations just like associated freedoms of speech, assembly and expression. In other words, it is a litmus test for the overall status of human rights. There is a concern that discussing such violations under the umbrella of tolerance and discrimination does not fully address the issue.

Of course the rights-based approach and the tolerance-based approach are both vital aspects of a holistic approach in an attempt to ensure freedom of thought and belief. However it is impossible to build tolerance where faith communities face harassment, imprisonment and torture for practising their belief. Unfortunately we have seen a discernible shift solely towards a tolerance based approach when there are major human rights violations in a number of OSCE participating states such as Belarus, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. We have provided some reports outside the hall.

In line with earlier recommendations, we urge the OSCE to return to the rights based approach and to allocate necessary resources to the ODIHR. We also urge the OSCE to seriously address freedom of thought and belief both as part of the human rights department as well within its tolerance programmes. In practice it would mean that violations of freedom of thought and belief would be addressed by a dedicated staff member within the ODIHR human rights department and discrimination of and intolerance against religious communities would be addressed by dedicated staff members within the tolerance department. We also wish to commend the work of the

existing structures especially the Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion and Belief and ask that its work is expanded and fully supported by the OSCE participating States.

Additionally, we hope that the OSCE participating States will strive for regular dialogue with religious communities and organisations working on freedom of thought, religion and belief as is the case with the UK and Dutch governments.

Finally, whilst we commend both the Romanian government and the OSCE for organising this vital conference, we note with regret that the programming of the conference is unfortunately experiencing similar problems to the Cordoba conference. Due to scheduling and other issues, sessions on combating discrimination of Muslim and Christian communities and racism have been given less prominence than others. For example, session 2 on combating discrimination of Muslim communities took place considerably later than scheduled which meant that many worthwhile interventions were made to nearly an empty room and with no interpretation. Session 3 on combating discrimination of Christian and other belief groups was allocated too little time and again many interventions went unheard.

We propose to the OSCE participating States extending the official conference to a three day one where the first day would be dedicated solely issues on addressing anti-Semitism and the thematic issue of hate crimes and the following two days would focus on other forms of discrimination and thematic issues such as freedom of thought and belief. Alternatively, the OSCE might consider organising two separate conferences – one on tolerance and one on freedom of thought and belief. We also propose that the organisers will allocate adequate time for interventions of both participating states and NGOs and other organisations present to ensure that the crucial participatory ethos of the conference is maintained.