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**STATEMENT BY MS. RIMMA VARZHAPETIAN,
CHAIRPERSON OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ARMENIA,
AT THE OSCE CONFERENCE ON ANTI-SEMITISM**

Vienna, 19-20 June 2003

Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Mr. Chairman,

I should like to thank everyone who has made it possible for me to travel to Vienna and participate in this conference. I am grateful to Mr. Tabibian, the Armenian Ambassador, for letting me be part of the Armenian delegation today, and this is in itself already confirmation of the absence of anti-Semitism as such in Armenia.

Distinguished Participants,

Right at the beginning, I have to point out that Armenia, which itself experienced genocide at the start of the twentieth century, is a country of absolute tolerance. In addition, conditions have been established in Armenia for the successful development of the different ethnic communities. Jews have an opportunity to freely study their language, traditions and customs and to sing Jewish songs and perform Jewish dances at various national festivals. We have a functioning synagogue. The lectures at the National University of Jewish Culture attract many Armenians who are interested in studying our culture. I am personally co-chairperson of the Union of Nationalities of Armenia, which brings together 12 different ethnic communities of the Republic.

There are, however, also problems. I should like to read an excerpt from a letter I received from the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Mr. Ruben Shugarian, dated 16 May 2003:

“I wish to assure you that the Armenian Government categorically rejects any manifestation of hatred towards other nationalities, something which is itself alien to the Armenian people.”

I received this assurance in response to my letter to the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressing concern in connection with the events that took place on the eve of 24 April - the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Genocide Perpetrated against the Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. Representatives of the youth wing of one of the nationalist parties set fire to a Turkish flag with the Star of David printed on it. They then organized a torch-light procession, using the burning Turkish flag to provide a flame, and

noisily expressed their indignation at Turkey and Israel for not acknowledging the Armenian Genocide.

In his letter, Mr. Shugarian assures me that this incident should not be regarded as a manifestation of anti-Semitism. He writes: "You are well aware of the significance of 24 April (Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Genocide) for the Armenian people. A few isolated emotional outbursts among young people in this context do not reflect the attitude of the Armenian people to our Jewish fellow citizens and to the Jewish people in general, who we have always treated with respect and sympathy".

Manifestations of anti-Semitism are in fact very rare in Armenia. There are anti-Semites, but no problem with anti-Semitism in general. In February of last year, Romen Yepiskoposian's book "National System", printed in Armenian and Russian, was presented at the Yerevan office of the Union of Writers of Armenia. No one in Armenia had heard of the author. The book was intended as an instrument which could be used in starting to form a national system. In the book, the Turks are called the "nation of murderers" and the Jews "the destroyer nation". In the chapter entitled "The Greatest Falsification of the Twentieth Century", the author makes the unsubstantiated claim that the Holocaust is a myth.

At the presentation of the book, people gathered who were mainly close to the author and who noisily welcomed the publication of the book. However, not a single positive word appeared about it in the press. On the contrary, that same day the popular television channel A1+ offered me an opportunity to appear live to express my deep indignation and concern and to call on the Armenian people not to fall for these pseudo-philosophers. Soon after, the Russian-language newspaper *Respublika Armeniya* published an article strongly condemning this book.

One can say that the situation with regard to anti-Semitism in Armenia is a two-sided one. On the one hand, the municipal authorities agreed to our proposal that a memorial be erected to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, and it was inaugurated in the centre of Yerevan in 1999 with representatives of broad sectors of Armenian society present. On the other hand, after the harsh statements made by a number of Israeli officials refusing to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide, we clearly felt the anti-Semitic mood. Swastikas were painted on the aforementioned memorial and on the doors of the office of the Jewish community; we received telephone threats and comments were published in the press that were not only anti-Israeli but also anti-Semitic. I should like to support Mr. Shugarian in this matter. Armenian society takes an extremely punctilious stance with regard to whether or not the Genocide is recognized. In recent years when many countries, including Russia, France, Italy, Greece and Switzerland and also a dozen American States, have officially recognized the Armenian Genocide, the categorical refusal to do so on the part of Israel cannot go unnoticed.

It should be pointed out that the emergence of an anti-Semitic mood in Armenia is largely due to Armenian migration in connection with the difficult economic situation, as a result of which the virus of anti-Semitism is being brought into our country. Children and young people who had never before heard a bad word uttered against the Jews now return to their homeland or come here on holidays and bring with them ideas of anti-Semitism that are alien to Armenian society. The so-called "Youth Party" has already distributed Nazi literature imported from the Russian Federation.

The Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is playing an important positive role and Minister Vardan Oskanian and his deputy Mr. Ruben Shugarian are personally supporting the Jewish community.

No less important, I should mention that, following my participation in the annual meeting of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC) in Washington from 5 to 11 May 2003, I visited Los Angeles where I was invited to appear live on a local Armenian television channel. I used this opportunity to clarify with the Armenian audience the position of the Jewish community of Armenia regarding recognition of the Genocide and also spoke about the relations between the citizens and the Armenian Government. I was on the air for more than an hour and, judging by the telephone calls to the studio, my comments met with understanding and approval. I hope that these steps will help us to continue to feel safe.

Distinguished Participants,

The workshop on tolerance, entitled "Tolerance - Lessons of the Holocaust", which we conducted last year under the auspices of the EAJC, showed us how important this issue is for general education in Armenian schools. At the start of the workshop, some history teachers were very guarded and not particularly welcoming to us. But the workshop concluded with words of gratitude to the organizers and the desire to continue the dialogue on tolerance and mutual understanding. The Armenian side expressed its willingness to introduce a school programme on tolerance, something which we consider to be very important. It should also be mentioned that a course on the study of religion has already been introduced in Armenian secondary schools.

On the basis of all that has been mentioned above, I believe it necessary to share some ideas with you, or perhaps I should say, suggestions. First, at this stage, we need to endeavour to introduce in schools a short course on the history of peoples and the lessons of tolerance. Second, organization of "tolerance camps" for children and young people is a very effective idea because children are our future and the future of our planet. It has to be said, by the way, that we already have experience in organizing such a camp together with the Ministry of Defence of Armenia; Armenian children have started to sing Jewish songs as a result of a joint holiday, which is a clear example of the concept of growing accustomed to the traditions of another people. These children will not become anti-Semites. Third, I should like to mention Unions of Nationalities which hold exhibitions and set up museums for the creative works of different peoples.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.