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**STATEMENT BY MR. EBERHARD SEIDEL,
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RACISM — SCHOOL WITH COURAGE NETWORK IN GERMANY,
AT THE OSCE CONFERENCE ON COMBATING DISCRIMINATION
AND PROMOTING MUTUAL RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING**

Bucharest, 8 June 2007

**Plenary Session 5:
Education to promote mutual respect and understanding, remembrance of
the Holocaust, and inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue**

Madam Chairperson,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Education to promote mutual respect and understanding, remembrance of the Holocaust and inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue is the title of this section. We are therefore dealing with a complex of themes that could be generally described as “Education in Human Rights”. The title reflects a challenge to our whole society, to the media, to families, and to the system of education from kindergarten right up to the universities. A special role in human rights education is played by schools, for that is the place — in all European countries at least — that all children and young people must pass through.

Accordingly I should like to put a few questions in the centre of my introductory remarks. What role can or should our schools play in human rights education? And can a school play an important role not only by improving norms and values but also by helping in the practical building of a civil society?

Naturally it would be desirable if schools attached high priority to training in tolerance. In Germany this is one of the core responsibilities of schools and as such it is laid down in the rules. However, real life is something else, and not only in Germany. The school as an institution is often overtaxed with such responsibilities because there is too little time and space for such things along with the basic responsibility of imparting knowledge.

Yet there is an urgent need to take action in this sphere because contempt for mankind does not stop at the school gates. The challenges can vary a great deal. Here are a few examples from Germany, but similar things could no doubt be reported from other parts of Europe.

- Pirna, a small town in the East of Germany. A 15-year-old girl called Toni lives here. Her father is from Mozambique and her mother from Germany. Toni stood out from a very young age because of the colour of her skin. She was stared at and insulted as well. Now her family are wondering whether they should leave the town or stand up to the hostility.
- At a school in Berlin a homosexual student was bullied by other pupils over a long period of time. The school staff were at their wits' end and finally urged the homosexual pupil to change schools, thus in effect declaring moral bankruptcy.
- In Verden, a city in North Germany, a strong and active youth scene with right-wing extremist views, beholden to the far-right NPD party, is formed. They want to open a training centre, and they threaten democratic students, who duly protest. Attacks follow.
- In Berlin a Jewish girl is insulted and physically attacked by fellow pupils — girls of Arab background. This is not the only case of its kind. A fair number of Jewish students, both boys and girls, have by now left the State schools and transferred to the Jewish grammar school because they could no longer tolerate the hostility.
- In other schools opinions such as “the Jews have too much influence in international politics” or “the Jews run Hollywood” are commonplace. “You Jew” is considered to be a suitably insulting epithet and is used to belittle fellow students.
- In yet other schools Muslim pupils are constantly told that their religion is responsible for wars and terrorism. They are held personally responsible for this and as a consequence feel rejected by the majority of the population.

So there can be no doubt about it: attitudes such as those described above poison the atmosphere in a school and make life unbearable for the persons affected. As a consequence they can badly disturb the inner peace of a whole society.

How can educational establishments react appropriately?

I was asked by the organizers of this conference to tell you about a few of the practical experiences we have had in the “School without Racism — School with Courage” movement. In order to understand why an institution such as the “School without Racism — School with Courage” should have been founded precisely in Germany you may need to take a little look at the past.

At the beginning of the nineties Germany experienced a wave of violence perpetrated by right-wing extremists which was aimed mainly at religious, ethnic and social minorities. The perpetrators were mostly adolescents. On the other side there were many children and young people who did not agree at all with these developments and would have been glad to take some sort of action against them. At the same time there exists among today's young people a certain distance towards mainstream social groups such as parties, churches or unions.

All this led to the thought that there ought to be some form of organization in which children and young people generally would have an opportunity to make their contribution to

strengthening democratic culture on a day-to-day basis and developing ethical values and norms without having to enter into long-term ties with organizations belonging to the grown-up world. In 1995 this culminated in the “School without Racism — School with Courage” initiative launched by the non-governmental organization “Aktion Courage”.

What is School without Racism? “School without Racism” is a European idea that originated in Belgium in 1988. At that time teachers and students were considering — in view of the growing strength of the extreme right-wing “Flams Block” — what they could do to oppose it effectively. In the meantime “Schools without Racism” have been founded in the Netherlands, Austria, Spain and Italy.

In Germany the project is called “School without Racism — School with Courage”. The idea of adding “School with Courage” is to make it plain that the pupils are not just against something but also for something. The organization offers children and young people generally a framework within which they can, independently and actively, participate in the substantive organization of human rights education in Germany.

For historical reasons we in Germany are retaining the formulation “School without Racism”. In practical work, however, the longer term, “School without Racism — School with Courage”, lends itself to general opposition to all forms of discrimination: discrimination on grounds of ethnic, religious and social affiliation, on grounds of gender and sexual orientation. We are guided here by the European non-discrimination guidelines.

Limiting ourselves, for example, to racism or anti-Semitism would be problematic because generally situations involving discrimination do not arise in isolation but as part of a syndrome; that is, they express an attitude based on assumptions about the inequality of human beings, and this attitude usually incorporates several examples of discrimination. Furthermore, it is a fact that victims of discrimination can themselves start discriminating against others in the twinkling of an eye. For example, homosexuals, women or migrants who fall victim to discrimination can at the same time trot out anti-Semitic ideas.

Awareness of all this leads us, in the case of “School without Racism — School with Courage”, to sensitize students to the many different forms of discrimination. The purpose of the project is to change daily school life in such a way that the atmosphere in the school is marked by a climate of mutual respect and recognition of individual qualities, combined with a joint search for norms that unite. This cannot be done solely by orders from above in ministers’ instructions or in teaching plans — it can be achieved only when an attitude is genuinely experienced, an attitude shared by as many individuals as possible in the school — teachers and pupils, but also technical personnel.

The best prospect of success is attained when those involved succeed in altering the profile of a whole school in this direction. It is nothing less than this that “School without Racism — School with Courage” is seeking to achieve in Germany.

At present “School without Racism — School with Courage” in Germany is a network of 350 schools attended by about 300,000 pupils.

A school is entitled to call itself “School without Racism — School with Courage” when at least 70 per cent of the pupils, teachers and technical personnel state and confirm with their signature that they,

- Firstly, will endeavour to ensure that a central task of the school lies in the development of long-term projects, activities and initiatives aimed at overcoming discrimination of every kind;
- Secondly, will actively oppose any appearance of violence and discriminating remarks or acts in the school and will collaborate with colleagues, should problems arise, to find ways of ensuring full, mutual respect for each other in the future;
- Thirdly, will try to ensure that projects on the subject of discrimination are carried out at least once a year.

When a school receives the title “School without Racism — School with Courage” it is not a reward for exemplary projects already performed but a commitment for the future.

“School without Racism — School with Courage” prescribes no binding curriculum. This is an initiative from below. The message to children and young people generally is: take up subjects related to the defence of human rights which interest you personally and work out your own proposals for appropriate activities.

The activities which students choose in practice can be illustrated very effectively in connection with Holocaust Remembrance:

The provision of knowledge and information about the Holocaust is a standard subject area in German schools. Yet one soon asks the question: How far do we get with pure knowledge transfer; what and how much does it bring? Because knowledge and information alone are naturally inadequate as a means of changing attitudes.

Many schools accordingly arrange talks with contemporary witnesses as well as meetings with Holocaust survivors. This touches students directly and imparts to them a strong motivation to tackle complex historical events. In addition there are visits to former concentration camps and memorials.

A regional approach can be very useful. Thus the students at a school near Saarbrücken in western Germany arranged an exhibition concerning the former Gestapo camp which also provided up-to-date information on the local extreme right-wing scene.

A primary school in Dortmund took up the question of what fate awaited the Jewish schoolgirls and schoolboys who attended their school between 1933 and 1945. They also prepared an exhibition, and subsequently the pupils took over care of the historic Jewish cemetery. Activities of this kind create a personal bond between the children and history.

Allow me to make one further remark in conclusion. At present the “School without Racism” project has offshoots in Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Spain and Germany. Initiative groups are to be found also in France and Italy, and Poland has shown interest in the project too. My wish is that this idea, which was launched in Belgium, should evolve further into a European initiative and make an important contribution to the development of tolerance and democracy.

Thank you for your attention.