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Mediterranean Seminar
“Combating intolerance and discrimination and promoting mutual respect and understanding”
Tel Aviv, 18 December 2007
Remarks by Margit Wästfelt, Permanent Representative of Austria to the OSCE,
Session 1

Mr. Moderator, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first of all thank the government of Israel for the generous hospitality by hosting the Seminar in Tel Aviv and in particular by hosting also the most important NOG-meeting on Monday.

I should like to make a few remarks which can also be seen as a support of several thoughts put forward by the speakers of the panel. I am starting by stating the obvious:

The continued existence of intolerance, racism and other forms of discrimination is an undeniable fact.

Let me also state our firm conviction that we must not be discouraged. Governments, civil society and international organizations and also the media, must continue to work hand in hand and take into account the efforts of the others. Only a comprehensive strategy, involving all layers of society will lead to the desired results.

Austria regards the OSCE as an essential forum for the promotion of increased dialogue, in good faith and with respect for the beliefs and the sensitivities of the other. Dialogue and the management of diversity nowadays represent a major challenge on the national, European and global level.

Austria is committed to protect and promote cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. For decades Vienna has been a centre of inter-religious dialogue between Christian Churches and between Christianity and Islam.

Each State and all its institutions bear a large share in the responsibility to fight intolerance and misunderstanding.

Beyond providing a legal basis, it is crucial that the political leadership creates the necessary social and economic conditions in order to inhibit the breeding ground for intolerance and discrimination. Needless to say that also the intellectual and ethical dimension is an absolute condition for a better understanding of the cultural and ideological roots of different societies.

Education, - we will speak about it in detail in the next session - is a big factor in influencing the thinking of individuals. Radicalisation seems to take place in a kind of “identity vacuum”, in which a lack of social or economic perspective might be one of the reasons. An ideology of radicalisation mantled in religious terms again and again seems to offer a kind of “global identity”. Change of attitude and social transformation will happen only if we can open our minds and hearts through education and consciousness.

To build solidarity, we need to network at the regional, national and international level to ensure that the commitments made in resolutions or at various conferences are respected and observed. We need to develop concrete projects that make people cooperate, work together, to develop strategies for conflict resolution and co-existence. Theological debates and intellectual discourse about values and fundamentals are important but not enough.

We must enhance mutual understanding on the basis of our firm convictions. Human rights and respect for the other are the common ground on which we need built our societies. Respecting diversity does not mean creating "parallel societies" separated by walls of hostility, though acknowledging the legitimate need to assure security. Multiculturalism or "cultural diversity" should not be used as an excuse for ignoring the fundamental human rights.

Austria lately places increased emphasis on the stronger involvement of women, their views and concerns in our daily political work, and in particular in international peace processes.

In May this year, our Federal Minister for European and International Affairs, Ms Ursula Plassik, hosted the conference "Women Leaders – Networking for Peace and Security in the Middle East" with a number of women ministers - the Foreign Minister of Israel, Ms Tzipi Livni, Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice - and experts from media, business and civil society from the region. In October a similar event with women political leaders from Serbia and Kosovo took place in Vienna.

These efforts in political dialogue clearly showed that women are ready to reach out to each other across national, ethnic and religious barriers and to engage in constructive dialogue.

I invite you to learn more about this initiative by a booklet at your disposal at the document-distribution outside of this room.