

ENGLISH only

*Statement by the OSCE Delegation of Belgium, delivered to the OSCE  
Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, Vienna, 4 – 5  
September 2003.*

Mr. Chairman,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It goes without saying that the Belgian Government is very much committed to the successful outcome of this important and timely conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination. There is six-word formula for success : 'think things through – then follow through'.

In recent years there has been a lot of thinking on the often very diverse forms and disguises of intolerance, such as Racism, anti-Semitism and religious intolerance, to name only a few reprehensible phenomena that have recently been discussed or are now being discussed by the OSCE. Now that we are getting closer to the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warschau, which brings all these topics together, we should start preparing ourselves for the follow-up of our thinking. After all, we will be judged by our actions, not by our intentions.

Common actions often are the result of the exchange of good practices, and let those practices be the purpose of my intervention. 2003 has so far been an important year for the struggle against Racism and related forms of discrimination in Belgium.

In the beginning of this year, a far-reaching new legislation was approved that considerably improves and enhances the judicial arsenal to combat discrimination, inter alia by broadening the list of sources of discrimination. Effective prosecution, however, as mentioned earlier today by some NGOs, is crucial. In that context, I can share with you that the effective prosecution of offences of a racist or negationist nature will be one of the government's priorities.

A second law that was approved in early 2003 considerably broadens the competences of the Center for Equal Opportunities and the Struggle against Racism. This Center, of which this year we celebrate the tenth anniversary, is an independent, autonomous 'watchdog' that brings together the expertise of some 100 experts. The Center not only analyses or monitors a very broad range of discriminations, it not only promotes racial equality through a number of initiatives, it not only assists victims of discrimination, but it also has the capacity and the mandate to make charges against those who commit discriminatory

offences. The Center not only barks, it also bites. We need such bodies with teeth, and we need to bring them together. The OSCE could play a role in that.

I would briefly like to mention another proof of our commitment. Last December, the Council of Ministers decided to ask the Center to elaborate a draft national plan of action as required by the UN Conference against Racism in Durban. Finalising this plan of action is a priority for the government. Moreover, I can announce that Belgium has offered to host the UN regional seminar on the follow-up of the Durban Conference. This regional seminar will take place in Brussels on the 10th, 11th and 12th of December.

Ladies and gentlemen, let's be realistic. All these efforts at the governmental level can only bear fruit if they are supported by civil society as a whole. In this context, I would like to underline the importance of a direct inter-community, interfaith dialogue, as will be illustrated later in this conference by the Belgian bisschop Mgr.Harpigny, who – himself a Catholic – has cherished the dialogue with Islam. Equally important is education. If racism indeed is learned, it also can be unlearned. Finally, let me mention media and communication, in particular the internet. Since 2002, the Belgian Center for Equal Opportunities and the Struggle against Racism registers complaints about racism on the internet as a separate category. This phenomenon is obviously on the rise and should be stopped before it gets the chance to spread itself widely.

Mr. Chairman, we face many challenges in combating Racism, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance. This OSCE meeting, as well as the one in Warschau in October should try to find concrete answers to them. I am convinced that the 7 recommendations to be presented by the European Union during this conference, as well as the recommendations made by many other participants, will contribute to this attempt.