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United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklós Haraszti

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 13, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Representative on Freedom of the Media has once again delivered a very informative, factually reliable and well-reasoned report. Two weeks ago, the OSCE observed the tenth anniversary of the office that Mr. Haraszti holds. The event took place here in this chamber, and panelists spoke who were media experts with first-hand experience throughout the OSCE region. One of the panelists noted that some post-Soviet-era countries seem to be competing among each other to create the worst possible conditions for independent journalism. Panelists also observed that the trend against media pluralism through government restrictions over broadcasting and by harassment of journalists is unfortunately on the rise, especially during election campaigns and at elections, as we could witness in the past months with sometimes even fatal results in a number of countries.

Surely we all understand by now that an essential element of any thriving democracy is free, robust, independent media. Sometimes this may be difficult or uncomfortable for governments. But, free and fair elections are predicated on an open atmosphere where candidates can express themselves, where they have access to the voters through mass media, and where a free press can provide the public with a richness of information, and diversity of perspectives that allow the electorate to make an informed choice.

Mr. Haraszti's report provides a wealth of details about specific cases and worrying trends. We should all be startled at what he characterizes as a "meltdown of OSCE commitments." He is not exaggerating when he calls it a meltdown.

We appreciate Mr. Haraszti's determination, under adverse circumstances, to see to it that his office persists as an advocate of freedom of expression for the members of the media and as an agent of change for promoting best practices and reform of media laws as a means to strengthen the groundwork of free expression.

In this regard, we found a ray of light in Mr. Haraszti's report as well. His office is continuing to assist Kazakhstan in reforming the country's media legislation. Fulfillment by Kazakhstan of its reform commitments made at last year's Ministerial in Madrid is vital to preparing Kazakhstan for a successful 2010 chairmanship of the OSCE. We look forward to reports of concrete progress.

Finally, we note the formation in Kyrgyzstan last month of the first independent media self-regulatory body in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan journalists' voluntary media-complaints commission will seek to safeguard freedom of the press by providing an alternative to court proceedings and giving moral redress in cases of violation of ethics guidelines. We note that particularly self-regulation by media professionals has been a topic of Mr. Haraszti's office for some time and was the theme of last year's Central Asia Media Conference in Dushanbe.

Well done, Mr. Haraszti.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.