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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement at the Supplemental Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Religion or Belief

As prepared for delivery by Chargé d' Affaires Casey Christensen,
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Session III: Places of Worship

The right of all religious communities to establish and maintain freely accessible places of worship or assembly is clearly laid out in our OSCE commitments. The implementation of this commitment in the OSCE area, however, sometimes falls short of this unambiguous statement of principle.

The United States fully recognizes the wide range of practices regulating places of worship in the OSCE regions. We commend those States that strive not to discriminate between religious groups by providing religious minorities with the same or similar benefits as those provided to "traditional" religions. In some participating States, benefits are provided for places of worship which serve only a portion of the believers in the community. We urge that these States consider extending those benefits to all, or to attempt some other form of compensation when possible. If a State's laws preclude financial support for minority religious groups, but funds "traditional" religious groups, the State could provide land for building a new place of worship, or land for a cemetery for those groups that require separate burial grounds.

The main challenge of participating States in fulfilling their commitments related to places of worship appear to be in accommodating religious groups with places of worship near where the communities of believers live. Balancing the needs of the religious community with the needs of the neighborhood that will house the place of worship is no easy task but States need to ensure that communities are allowed reasonable accommodations in the site of their place of worship.

Accommodating minority religious groups is perhaps the largest challenge for OSCE participating States, but needs to occur to the maximum extent feasible. Religious groups should not be denied approval to build new buildings for their services because they already have access to an old warehouse or former garage to use as a house of worship. In some participating States, Muslims have been denied the right to use traditional Islamic design, such as minarets, in their worship buildings. When such disagreements arise, we should accommodate in ways that enhance the freedom of religion and respect for the "other."

In some OSCE participating States, governments are wrongfully transferring properties of some religious communities to state-favored groups. For example, in Russia, the government has seized without compensation several properties built or renovated by the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church. The properties were subsequently transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church. In several other countries, including Croatia, Romania, Turkey,

and Ukraine, difficulties remain in implementing laws on restitution to religious communities of properties which earlier regimes had seized. Restitution should be accomplished in an expeditious and fair manner.

Above all, Governments should be conscious of the need to strengthen tolerance and respect for minority religious groups. One way in which they can do so is to avoid contributing to and participating in media productions that sensationalize the "other" at worship. For example, state-sponsored stations in Azerbaijan, Russia, Germany, and elsewhere have run television programs about allegedly dangerous sects and filmed Baptists, Pentecostals, Scientologists, or Jehovah's Witnesses in service or leaving the service. Such television "news coverage" contributes to intolerance and acts of hate-motivated vandalism against unpopular minority religious groups and their places of worship. The Jehovah's Witnesses in France, for example, have experienced 295 acts of vandalism against places of worship since 2006.

The United States welcomes the dialogue we have had on these important issues and will continue to work within the OSCE framework and bilaterally with our partners to enhance the implementation of our shared commitments to respect freedom of religion, conscience and belief.

Thank you.