

Open Doors International

Mr. Arie de Pater, speaking at the OSCE High Level conference

Plenary session 3: Combating racism, xenophobia and
discrimination, also focusing on intolerance and discrimination
against Christians and members of other religions.

Bucharest, 8 June 2007

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Madam moderator, distinguished delegates,

I want to thank the Romanian host and the Spanish Chairmanship for organizing this conference on combating Discrimination and Intolerance.

I am representing the Dutch NGO Open Doors International. Open Doors, a Christian NGO established in the Netherlands more than 50 years ago, is promoting religious freedom for all.

Open Doors acknowledges the efforts taken by all of you present here and the governments you represent, promoting freedom of religion for all people living on your territory. However, there is hardly any reason to lean backwards as the situation is still far from ideal for many religious minorities in the OSCE.

Let me just give you some examples.

In **Kazakhstan**, yesterday, the local administration chief ordered members of the embattled Hare Krishna near Almaty to demolish their own temple and other buildings within ten days.

Heavy fines imposed in Atyrau on 4 June on six Jehovah's Witnesses for meeting for worship without state registration.

Non registered Baptists in Kazakhstan are facing similar violations of the right to freedom of religion.

Problems in **Belarus** were already touched upon by one of the previous speakers.

In **Uzbekistan** Protestant Pastor Dmitry Shestakov was sentenced to four year in prison earlier this year, In May, Pentecostal Christian Salavat Serikbayev was given a two-year suspended jail sentence for

teaching religion illegally, Serikbayev has now been allowed home, but he could be jailed if he commits any further "crime," such as any religious activity the authorities do not like. He was also banned from travelling abroad and the court ordered that 20 per cent of any salary he earns be taken from him.

From **Turkmenistan** we are receiving signals that the situation is not improving as well. On 14 May, Baptist Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, has been jailed for three years in a labour camp. Another Baptist, Yevgeny Potolov, was arrested by the secret police on 19 May. No charges have been brought against him and the MSS is refusing to tell his wife Nadezhda why he has been held.

Attending on Wednesday both the session on intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and the session on intolerance and discrimination against Christians, I was once again struck by the similarity of the problems they are facing, as are other religious or belief groups. May I therefore recommend reconsidering the fact that there are two separate Special Representatives dealing either with Christians or with Muslims. In my humble opinion, although I understand where they come from, these split mandates can easily lead to segregation and thereby aggravate the problems rather than resolve them.

Religious Freedom goes far beyond discrimination and intolerance as it touches upon freedom of assembly and freedom of speech as well. We would therefore ask OSCE to return to the rights based focus.

Open Doors International and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, represented at this conference by Mrs. Joanna Chellapermal, are among the founding members of the Brussels based European Platform on Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (hereafter EPRID). This platform unites representatives from various religious and belief groups who make it a common effort to speak out for religious freedom whenever possible. Acknowledging the different opinions about the essence of our deepest convictions, we focus on what we have in common, our joint commitment to the right to freedom of religion or belief and our shared desire to live in a peaceful and open society.

Based on our experience, EPRID encourages OSCE member state to establish this kind of platform dealing with religious freedom. Platforms like this, based on respect and a common interest, encourage integration rather than segregation and is not that what we are all aiming at?

Madam moderator,

At this and previous OSCE and ODIHR conferences many words have been spoken and studies have been performed. However, despite all these efforts, freedom of religion or belief is still a sometimes even distant dream for many living on OSCE territory. I therefore challenge you all present here, to live up to your obligations and expectations. Especially these countries holding or running for a leading position should be shining examples respecting human rights including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Thank you for your attention.