



United States Mission to the OSCE

Release of the 2008 Report on International Religious Freedom

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 25, 2008

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

On Friday, September 19, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice transmitted to the United States Congress the 10th annual United States Report on International Religious Freedom. We hope this report will serve as a useful resource for delegations and the OSCE Institutions and Offices. In her remarks at the release of the report, Secretary Rice said that "Religious freedom is at the core of our nation, now as always." The rights to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, expression, and assembly are essentials enshrined in the founding documents of our country, particularly in the Bill of Rights.

These rights are also essential guiding principles for this Organization. The annual report highlights both the admirable protections, and the unjust violations, of religious freedom across the globe. Our focus is on government policies and actions, but we also highlight societal attitudes and abuses. In the OSCE region, the report reflects some troubling trends, including religious groups having difficulties in registration, securing places of worship and facing discrimination by government sanctioned denominations, as well as concerns about police raids and arrests for peaceful religious activity. We look forward to the Special Day on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw next week for a more complete discussion of these problems.

OSCE participating States should reject actions that are offensive to particular religious traditions, but we cannot condone the prohibition of free expression. We welcome the opportunity to collaborate on initiatives that both respect human rights and foster a climate of religious tolerance. But we should be equally wary of efforts to criminalize statements or publications deemed offensive to a particular religion. Although such efforts may be aimed at protecting religious practice and promoting tolerance, in reality they may have the effect of limiting freedom of expression.

Through our bilateral relationships, our work in international fora, and our ongoing engagement with NGOs, religious groups, civil society leaders, and scholars, the United States will continue to actively promote religious freedom for all as essential to human dignity, a robust civil society, and democratic development.

The English language version of the report can be found at the website noted in our statement that will be distributed.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The English language version of the report can be found at the following website:
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/index.htm>