

**OSCE Conference on Racism,
Xenophobia and Discrimination**

ENGLISH only

Lord Ahmed – OSCE Conference, Vienna

4/5 September 2003

Mr Chairman, Your Excellencies, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to congratulate OSCE participating states for their commitment to strengthening human rights standards, combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

This Conference is timely and it is important.
It is timely, because there is an increase of racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in Europe.

Whether it is verbal abuse, threats, racist graffiti or physical attacks on individuals, or attacks on cultural and religious buildings these have increased.

Whilst some Governments have made considerable progress in introducing legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination I believe that not enough has been done to monitor and prosecute the perpetrators of these heinous crimes.

We all know the legal speed limit on our highways and yet we have thousands of speed cameras and police officers monitoring us and even then millions of us are prosecuted annually.

What we need is speed cameras for those who abuse human rights, who incite hate against others and who use violence against the most vulnerable in our society.

Mr Chairman, I welcome statements made by participants at the OSCE Anti-Semitism Conference in June, including Lord Janner and Mayor Giuliani, emphasising the importance of inter-religious dialogue.

I believe inter-faith work is important for bringing down the barriers. We need inter-faith at local, regional, national and international levels. It is for this reason that I support inter-religious Council at the UN.

Inter-faith and inter-religious work can promote greater tolerance and understanding. In fact, religion could bring its considerable weight to the resolution of contemporary national and international problems of mankind.

Dialogue between communities and faiths is vital to foster equality, mutual respect and prevent discrimination.

Together we must tackle discrimination in all its forms, be this violence against Muslims, Jews, Christians or any other religious or ethnic group.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe richness of racial and religious diversity in the United Kingdom is a national strength, not a weakness, an opportunity and not a threat.

London is the most diverse city in the world with 13 major religions and 300 languages. We have a society which is one of the most tolerant and compassionate in the world, and yet we have the racist British National Party and extreme religious organisations including a few from my own who cause hatred amongst our communities.

We are one of the first European countries with Race Relations legislation dating back to 1976 and Commission for Racial Equality with powers to prosecute and make recommendations to the Government.

What we need now is legislation to outlaw religious discrimination and incitement to religious hatred.

The UK has a comprehensive body of legislation to combat racial discrimination which will be further strengthened by the incorporation of the European Race and Employment Directives into UK law by the end of the year. Legislation ensures that public authorities have to be pro-active in promoting equality, rather than just reacting to discrimination after it has happened. Laws exist against incitement to racial hatred and on racially and religiously aggravated offences. The incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law under the Human Rights Act 1998 has also contributed to promoting equality in the UK.

The incitement of Public Order Act makes it an offence to use or publish insulting or abusive words (or behaviour) with an intention to stir up racial hatred against a group of people defined by reference to colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origin.

Since 9/11 we have a changed world, with the threat of international terrorism and the rise of the religious right.

All of us were horrified at the attack on the twin towers and the tragedies that have followed. Nobody has felt the brunt of the tragedy more than the Muslims and our faith Islam.

One week after 9/11 over 700 incidents of attacks were reported in the USA on Muslims and thousands more in Europe. Even Sikh and Hindu communities have been victims of racist attacks.

For some, Islamophobia in the media has become acceptable, demonisation of Muslims and Islam became the norm. In fact, for certain TV and print media Islam and terrorism became interchangeable. Muslim communities in Europe and in the United States became isolated and vulnerable.

Islamophobia has become a contemporary form of racism and it must stop.

I support the June Conference recommendations and urge you to consider inserting Islamophobia along with anti-Semitism, racial, ethnic and religious discrimination.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, it is important to ensure OSCE works together with other regional organisations to tackle problems of racism, xenophobia and discrimination. Much good work has already been done within the EU and Council of Europe.

Finally, I hope that any recommendations for an OSCE monitoring mechanism will draw on valuable work undertaken by the EU Monitoring Centre and European Commission on Racism and Intolerance both of which tackle diverse forms of racism including Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

We have a great agenda for the next day and a half. I very much look forward to learning and sharing from experiences of other delegates.