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**The rights of every person, regardless of race, religion, nationality
or other affiliation, must be respected**

Mr. Moderator
Ladies and Gentlemen

Nowadays, one of the most important elements in the contemporary world in the system of human rights and freedoms is the freedom of conscience. The right to believe or not to believe in any religion is the natural right of every human being. During hundreds of years, people have been struggling to get this very right.

Today freedom of religion has been fully respected in the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the country religion is separate from the state and the state and education are secular. Multiculturalism, tolerance has become the lifestyle in the country.

Azerbaijan as a multinational and poly-confessional state supports the principle of “unity and diversity”. We are proud that there was not any case of intolerance and discrimination on the ground of ethnic belonging, religion, language and culture at any stage of the century-old history of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan, located at the crossroads of various civilizations throughout many centuries has become famous as a country where was formed the atmosphere of national cultural diversity, where representatives of various nationalities and faiths live in the atmosphere of peace and welfare, mutual understanding and dialogue. The multiculturalism and tolerance historically inherent in the life of Azerbaijanis today became an integral feature of everyday life of each citizen of the Azerbaijani state, irrespective of national identity, language and religion. Not only today’s tolerant manner of life of our people, but also the literary and art, scientific and philosophical, political and legal sources and documents created by this people are the evidence to the rich multicultural past of the Azerbaijani people.

Now, there are a number of various models of multiculturalism. But the multiculturalism model which is presented to the world by Azerbaijan is approved and takes root as model for many progressive states of the world. This model is steadier as it has historical roots. Today, multiculturalism does not have alternative. We have the right to be proud of the fact that from the point of view of cultural values, our country holds a leading position in this sphere and is perceived by people of the world as an irreplaceable example.

The multiculturalism which has turned into a state policy appears as an invariable lifestyle in modern Azerbaijani society.

On the backdrop of all this, unfortunately, we see a dangerous tendency - Islamophobia trends in Europe and in the West in a general. The prejudiced attitude, biases towards Muslims or simply against the people of the Islamic world is widely occupying the public opinion and in public life crossing the domestic level.

Today, some Western countries are attempting to bring restrictions at a legislative and legality levels to those who try to live in accordance with Islamic rules, including citizens of these countries.

The people in this category are considered as those of the second or third sort of humans, obstacles are created to their clothing, nutrition and education.

Such a reaction to the religion of more than one billion people considered as one of the greatest religions in the world religions is surprising.

The freedom of conscience to any religion as one of the most fundamental rights is reflected in all major human rights instruments. There is no international act and there is not a single state in a civilized world that does not have this issue enshrined in its constitution and provisions. In such a case, it is very regretful to see Islamophobia tendencies.

Discrimination against Muslims, vandalism against mosques in some countries, interference with women's clothing, moral and psychological pressure and influence, restrictions on the use of hijab, establishing a biased public opinion against the Muslim values and the Muslim world in the media bodies, blackmail campaigns with the burning of the holy book of Islam are well-known to all of us as representatives of human rights organizations.

This is regretful to see, especially in some countries, the attempts to curb provocative cartoons against the Islamic prophet under the curtain of the freedom of expression.

Definitely, the freedom of expression, the freedom of the press, and creative freedoms are important. But it is also wrong to touch the sensitive points of people and this can be assessed as an incitement to commit violations. It should not be forgotten that, according to the universally recognized principle, one's rights are up to the point where the rights of others begin.

Some European countries are reluctant to withdraw from this form of coexistence, especially in the environment of the growing number of migrants. We consider this is a dangerous approach.

Such a question can rise on how to avoid these dangerous trends. Nevertheless this has a simple answer. The answer will be - treating fundamental human rights and freedoms, not as a theoretical, abstract concept, but as a one requiring a realistic, practical approach and also through understanding the diversity of the world, the differences among people, the different world outlook and the norms of coexistence. Only such a perception and the steps following from it can prevent discrimination, xenophobia, racial and national discrimination.

This should be noted that the importance of the role Ombudsman plays in the fight against discrimination is recognized worldwide.

The role of the NHRIs in combat against discrimination in the frames of his competences was emphasized in the recommendations adopted at the 3rd Meeting of

Intergovernmental Working Group for implementation of Durban Declaration and Action Plan.

Seventeen years have passed since the establishment of the Ombudsman Institution - one of the main mechanisms in protection of human rights and freedoms in Azerbaijan. In the reviewed period one of the directions of many branched activity of the Ombudsman in protection of human rights and freedoms was fight against discrimination, elimination of such factors, and conduction of awareness-raising actions in this field.

According to the related provision of the Constitutional law everyone living in the country has the right to appeal to the Ombudsman irrespective their nationality, ethnicities, religion, language and other factors. Also the Ombudsman examines the complaints of the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan, foreigners and stateless persons, asylum seekers as well as legal entities related to the violation of the human rights.

With regard to implementation of the international convention "On elimination of all forms of racial discrimination" to which our country is a party the Ombudsman held several awareness-raising campaigns and put forward many proposals in respect of ensuring religious tolerance, legal and moral education and mutual relations between people having various religious views.

The protection and promotion of freedom of conscience of national and religious minorities has always been in the main focus of the Ombudsman.

Ombudsman of Azerbaijan has taken number of measures for the ensuring of the rights of free conscience and religion of national minorities.

Regional Centers of the Commissioner for Human Rights were opened in four regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan where national minorities live more compactly.

Peace month-long campaign is held from 21 August to 21 September, 2015, lectures were delivered by the Ombudsman and her staff for the representatives of different state bodies, events involving civil society organizations and mass media were organized, programs dedicated to peace were broadcasted on TV and Radio channels articles were published in newspapers.

We continue talking about intolerance and discrimination against Muslims that is Islamophobia at a time when a highly moralized rhetoric of good and evil has become increasingly strident in Western political discourse in the last decade or so, not just as a result of the 'war on terror' but also in the wake of the resurgence of social and political conservatisms and their critique of the moral relativism of liberalism and multiculturalism. It has asserted a hardening of boundaries between good and bad, between law-abiding citizens and wrongdoers, endemic to a global culture of fear. The emergence of what is often referred to as 'Islamophobia' has become inextricably bound to this rhetoric.

Islamophobia, as the intensification of long-standing anti-Muslim prejudice amounting to a widespread hostility in the west, is a complex and dynamic phenomenon.

In the end, bringing to your attention some of the points assuming importance of present for elimination of Islamophobia, which was nominated by Personal Representative of OSCE Bülent Şenay and we call international organizations to carry out lobbying activities in this direction:

- Recording anti- Muslim/Islamophobic crimes as a category of hate crime by the police
- Protecting free speech while developing good guidelines to tackle online hate speech and considering primary legislation to deal with social media offences and online hate speech
- Developing teaching materials to educate young people on anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination and prioritizing religious education in the national curriculum to prepare young people for life in a religiously plural society
- Tackling religious discrimination in the workplace and address the low level of economic activity among Muslims through targeted interventions at stages of recruitment, retention and promotion; improving access to employment for Muslim women. (Particularly after the ECJ decision which almost legitimizes discrimination against Muslim women)
- Preserving the Human Rights Act and the protection of minority rights including religious slaughter (on the contrary there are more and more bans on religious slaughter now), circumcision and the wearing of religious dress or symbols
- Curbing the encroachment of counter-terrorism policies on civil liberties by working with Muslim communities, not against them, in the so-called “de-radicalization” programs.
- Committing to democracy and human rights promotion abroad, including the rights of religious minorities.

Thanks for your attention!