



United States Mission to the OSCE
Response to Head of Office in Baku
Ambassador Jose-Luis Herrero

As delivered by Political Counselor Samuel C. Laeuchli
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 12, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We welcome Ambassador Herrero back to the Permanent Council, and thank him for his very comprehensive report. The United States strongly supports the Office's work, which has been broadly directed to assist the authorities in Azerbaijan to hold free and fair elections in line with OSCE commitments this coming October.

The October presidential election presents an important opportunity for Azerbaijan to demonstrate its commitment to democratic reform. The pre-election climate - particularly with respect to media freedom, candidate access to the media, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association - is just as important to the conduct of the election as the actual voting and vote tabulation process. Azerbaijan's parliament recently amended its law on freedom of assembly and unified electoral code; we hope that these important pieces of legislation will be implemented in a way that enables citizens to better exercise their fundamental human rights.

We also would like to highlight the importance of domestic, nonpartisan election monitoring. We hope that soon a solution will be found to allow the Election Monitoring Center (EMC) to address the technical issues that Azerbaijani authorities raised as justification of their recent de-registration of this group. Closure of an organization for technical reasons is a disproportionate response.

The OSCE Office in Baku is actively engaged in several projects that will help improve the pre-election climate. The U.S. is proud to support the Office's police assistance programs, including new public order management and human rights sensitivity training, which should enable the Azerbaijani police to respond professionally to demonstrations and other public events. We look forward to the expansion of the pilot community policing program throughout Azerbaijan. In our view, these innovative centers directly contribute to the safety and security of the Azerbaijani people and help create and maintain conditions for democratic development from the grassroots level.

We continue to support the work of the Office and the Representative on Freedom of the Media in their vital work to improve the situation regarding freedom of the media in Azerbaijan. We will pay close attention to the media situation in the run-up to the October election as we have been greatly concerned by incidents over the past year in which journalists have been harassed or unjustly prosecuted.

The Office's efforts regarding rule of law, especially through the Trial Monitoring Program, should provide the Azerbaijani authorities with a sound basis to undertake a thorough reform of the judiciary. We support the Office's intention to focus on administration of justice in the coming year.

We fully support the Office's commitment to deepening democratic governance in Azerbaijan and promote reforms to bring Azerbaijan's legislation in line with international standards. We agree fully with your assessment, Ambassador Herrero, that the way in which the new legislation is implemented will be crucial.

We encourage the Office to work together with civil society, and to discuss constructive solutions for some of Azerbaijan's most pressing human rights problems.

During his April 2006 meeting with President Bush, President Aliyev expressed Azerbaijan's gratitude for U.S. assistance in the process of democratization, and pledged his commitment to continuing this cooperation in the future. We can only reaffirm today the United States' commitment to continue working together with the Government of Azerbaijan and the OSCE Office in Baku to assist Azerbaijan's development as a modern democratic country.

Ambassador Herrero, we wish you all the best for your work in the coming year.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.