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OSCE Conference on Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination

by Ambassador Omur Orhun

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- In spite of the tangible progress achieved in elimination of institutionalized forms of discrimination, international community still experiences new and mounting waves of bias, exclusion and racist violence. They constitute a major threat to friendly and peaceful relations not only among states, but among peoples as well. Hence, the need to struggle against all forms and manifestations of discrimination is more evident than before.
- While Western values in the human rights field claim - rightly- universality, ironically we also witness an insurgence of intolerance, racist violence and racial and religious discrimination in many "Western" countries. They target migrant workers, their families, students, refugees and other vulnerable groups, who have different religious, ethnic, cultural and traditional characteristics. Often their colour is not the same with the majority of the societies where they live or want to live.
- From discrimination in employment and housing, to violent actions and even murder, the evidence of resurgent racism and xenophobia is both stark and startling. Moreover, recently some circles have started to depict Islam or Muslims as the root-cause of most evil. This is nothing but "Islam-phobia" and as such deplorable. What causes additional concern is that not only extremist circles and parties, but also certain segments of the society and the media seem to be fuelling such tendencies. Turkey, with more than four million of its citizens residing in Western countries, has real and justifiable concerns.

(text)

All human beings are born equal in dignity and rights. Any doctrine or practice of racial superiority, therefore, is legally and morally unacceptable and cannot be justified on any ground. Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance threaten the basic fabric of our societies and moral values.

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The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), bringing together 55 countries from Vancouver to Vladivostok, is the largest regional international organization, dedicated also to norm and standard setting. OSCE's comprehensive approach to security includes human security as one of its important components.

Additionally, the common values of the OSCE are based on a firm commitment to human rights and recognition of the inherent dignity of all human beings. In that respect, it is recognized that human rights and fundamental freedoms are essential safeguards of tolerance and non-discrimination, which are indispensable elements of stability, security and cooperation.

Taking all these into consideration, the Ministerial Council of the OSCE adopted an important decision on tolerance and non-discrimination during its last meeting. In line with this decision, an international conference on racism, xenophobia and discrimination will be held in Vienna on 4-5 September. This important gathering will examine the causes and manifestations of racism, xenophobia and discrimination, including violence and discrimination against Muslims.

The overall aim of the conference will be to exchange information, identify and share good practices and contribute to developing a holistic, coordinated, complementary and coherent approach in tackling related issues. The emphasis will be on practical and concrete action. Examining conformity of legislation of member countries with principles of non-discrimination, evaluating policies and practices of governments to redress racism and xenophobia, looking into the role of the police and the judiciary in combating racism and xenophobia will constitute the first part of the conference, together with an analysis of the causes and manifestations of racism, xenophobia and discrimination. Additionally, the conference will dwell on the role of education, information and awareness-raising in promoting respect for ethnic and religious diversity, leading to tolerance and social inclusion.

Finally, the participants to the conference are expected to underline the importance of inter-faith dialogue, as a mechanism to support understanding and mutual respect.

The OSCE is committed to preventive action and confidence building as an effective way to develop good relations among its members and among the citizens of its members. As such, it is hoped that the September Conference will draw on conclusions and recommendations from previous OSCE events on tolerance and non-discrimination and will build on these recommendations.

Turkey attaches high importance to this conference and has taken active part in its preparation. In fact, one of the keynote speeches at the opening session will be delivered by Prof. Ioanna Kucuradi, Chair of Human Rights at the Institute of Social Sciences of Hacettepe University.

Indeed, the OSCE Conference have similar objectives with that of the OIC-EU Joint Forum which was held in Istanbul in February 2002, although their exact contexts are somewhat different. It would be recalled that the Istanbul Forum had also explored means for promoting tolerance as well as inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and had reaffirmed the strong belief that cultures, in their diversity, complement and enhance one another. The main means to support coherence and solidarity and to avoid racial, religious and cultural prejudices was identified as the knowledge of one another through communication and cooperation for promotion of common universal values.

Let me now try to complement the picture from a wider perspective. We witness today the uneasy togetherness of two counter tendencies. On the one hand, integration, in some cases reaching supranational dimensions, and on the other hand disintegration, leading to micro-nationalism, inter-ethnic struggles and extremism in all its forms. Curiously enough, all these are taking place in the age of globalization.

In the OSCE region, Western Europe and Northern America are enjoying one of the longest periods of peace and prosperity in their history. Economic integration has advanced rapidly, historical enmities, fears and suspicions are no more, and the threat from the former adversarial bloc has disappeared.

However, as West moves in this direction, people from other parts of the globe, who are in search of a better living due to the widening gap of prosperity between rich and poor countries, are now perceived as the new threat against the stability and even identity of the West. But this is not all.

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On the other hand, in the wider OSCE region, where intolerance, sectarianism and extreme ideologies have been the cause of many conflicts, ethnic, religious or sectarian violence continue to flare and threaten peace, security and stability.

In this age of advanced communication and technology, countries and peoples have become increasingly inter-dependent. They are also more vulnerable to negative changes and developments affecting other parts of the globe. In order to avoid ethnic, religious and sectarian violence and conflicts, universal ethics and principles can be developed, possibly under the OSCE umbrella.

On its account, Turkey is fully committed to the fight against racism, xenophobia and discrimination. Our millennium long experience on a land where countless cultures and religions co-existed throughout history helped building a culture of tolerance, which led to an exemplary conciliation and harmonization among Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Turkey's contribution to international efforts in the fight against acts generated by racial or religious hatred is guided by this experience. History has taught us that lack of mutual knowledge and respect among cultures can greatly and adversely affect peace and stability. Harmony and welfare, on the other hand, are nurtured when different peoples make communication a priority, taking time to express and listen to each other's views and interests, acknowledging and tolerating differences, while at the same time seeking out commonalities that can help build strong and enduring relationships that promote cooperation.

The desired level of respect and harmony can only be achieved if there exists strong political will. Additionally, active involvement of the civil society is a must. Our primary tools in an effective long term strategy towards this end are education and media.

Targeted education and awareness raising is also required. The first step should be overcoming existing prejudices towards one another. Eventually, tolerance, acceptance, respect for the other and inclusiveness will become part of our daily life and political practice.

These considerations will constitute the general approach of the Turkish Delegation at the forthcoming OSCE Conference on non-discrimination. I earnestly hope that the conference will yield constructive recommendations in the struggle against racism, xenophobia and all forms of discrimination. I also wish that this conference will be followed up with similar events, since discrimination is not likely to go away soon.

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