

Closing Remarks by Ambassador Christian Strohal,
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human
Rights (ODIHR)

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on “Human Rights Defenders
and National Human Rights Institutions: Legislative, State and Non-State
Aspects”

Vienna, 30 – 31 March 2006

We have come to the end of our meeting. I will certainly not try to make a summary of the summaries, just a few comments. Let me start by thanking you all who have travelled to this meeting. It was extremely useful to have so many human rights defenders, including NGO and National Human Rights Institutions representatives making their concerns and suggestions known. We were able to register more than 100 NGOs and National Human Rights Institutions. Let me also thank the representatives of other International Organizations and other OSCE Institutions and Missions for their contributions. I also appreciate the presence of many government representatives, whom I would encourage to be more proactive in such meetings.

Thank you all for your valuable input.

The discussions have highlighted that the work of human rights defenders has a decisive impact on the consolidation of democratic institutions and the enhancement of national human rights systems.

We heard about various conditions under which human rights defenders have to carry out their brave work. It is clear that in some countries these conditions are not conducive, or worse. So as a first principle it was recognized by the participants that each country should provide open and inclusive fora to discuss issues of concern to civil society.

In this respect, support to women’s organizations is of particular importance for stepping up efforts to guarantee protection of women’s rights and strengthen their position.

We realize that for many human rights defenders coming to this meeting and making a public statement was a human rights activity in itself – sadly, the possibility cannot be fully excluded that upon returning to their

countries they may encounter reprisals triggered by their remarks. I can only again call on States to acknowledge the usefulness of their NGOs' contributions and act on their responsibility to protect human rights defenders. We in the ODIHR will make sure to stay in touch with all NGOs we had here at the meeting and will be ready to offer our support, jointly with relevant OSCE missions.

Just a few remarks on some of your recommendations then, from a practical ODIHR perspective.

A number of participants voiced the idea of creating a Special Mechanism on Human Rights Defenders for the OSCE region. Also the recommendation was made for having systematic monitoring and follow up on the situation of women human rights defenders. This proposal is not new; it is, however, certainly interesting: When this idea will be further discussed, a few considerations might be useful: The experiences of other regional organizations, such as the African Union and the Organization of American States (OAS), but, in particular, the experiences of Hina Jilani, to who I am very grateful for her clear remarks in her opening speech.

Other alternative ways have been suggested in which to enhance the capacity of the Organization. These included strengthening my Institution to support and strengthen the capacity of human rights defenders. Based on our existing general human rights mandate, my Office will certainly take all suggestions directed at us very seriously in order to further strengthen our work on human rights defenders, on issues of freedom of assembly and association, on capacity building for civil society on national institutions, and on support for dialogue and cooperation at the national, and local, levels.

Our effectiveness greatly depends on political will, but also on financial and human resources – similar problems that Hina Jilani and others referred to. We are thankful to all Delegations that support our work in this area and to all NGOs and individual human rights defenders whose enthusiasm and idealism makes our work with them particularly gratifying. However, our work can still be improved, and I admit that we still need to establish a better rapport with a number of countries. Let me also urge all OSCE participating States to be open to visits of Hina Jilani and to accept and implement her recommendations.

Participants have also called on the OSCE Ministerial Council to explore possibilities of adopting clear tasks for all OSCE institutions and

missions on concrete ways how to support and protect human rights defenders. Clear strategies always make work easier. As the Chairmanship noted in their opening statement, OSCE commitments could be further enhanced and reinforced through incorporation of guidelines and principles adopted by other international organizations.

In particular for those involved in elaborating or assessing NGO laws, the Council of Europe's Fundamental Principles on the Status of NGOs in Europe is a particularly useful document and could be a valuable addition if brought into the OSCE context. When deciding on interventions on behalf of persecuted human rights defenders, OSCE missions can make use of the Handbook issued by the ODIHR on the topic. Participants have also pointed out that other Organizations such as the European Union, have issued clear instructions to their Delegations through their Guidelines on human rights defenders.

On freedom of assembly, the ODIHR looks forward to consolidating its draft Guidelines on Drafting Laws Pertaining to Freedom of Assembly through a process of consultations with governmental experts and representatives of civil society. We count on support of the governments and their active involvement in this process.

A detailed report from this meeting will be prepared within a month and made available to you all. I encourage participating States to endorse and implement the recommendations. They are the results of constructive and intensive discussions among OSCE delegations, civil society and international organizations and deserve more than a place in the OSCE records.

In conclusion, I would like to once more thank all speakers of our Meeting, in particular Ms. Hina Jilani for her opening remarks. My special thanks go to Neil Hicks, who did such an excellent job in moderating all three sessions. I appreciate the support given to us by the Chairmanship in the preparation of this event and would like to thank the interpreters for their hard work.

Finally, let me extend my heartfelt thanks to all the ODIHR staff, who worked so hard to put this meeting together.

I thank all of you for your participation and wish you a safe journey back. I hope to be able to welcome many of you at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in the first half of October where we can

continue discussions on many of the issues raised yesterday and today,
and take a first stock of the follow-up give to your recommendations.