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**STATEMENT BY MR. RENAUD MUSELIER,
JUNIOR MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE
FRENCH REPUBLIC, AT THE OSCE CONFERENCE ON
TOLERANCE AND THE FIGHT AGAINST RACISM,
XENOPHOBIA AND DISCRIMINATION**

Brussels, 13 September 2004

Mr. Secretary General,
Distinguished Ministers,
Distinguished Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are certain observations one wishes one did not have to make. Two centuries following the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and some sixty years following the liberation of the death camps, our consciences are challenged. Despite the phenomenon of globalization, which is breaking down barriers and bringing peoples closer together, the musty odour of racism and xenophobia is still in the air. In a number of places there has been a resurgence of anti-Semitism and everywhere insidious forms of discrimination are encroaching on our traditions of hospitality and openness. The credibility of our values is at stake. If even we do not know how to respect these values, how can it be expected that persons caught up in radical change will be able to find answers to their questions?

In the face of these disturbing observations, we are marshalling our common resolve. Following the Berlin conference on anti-Semitism and the Paris conference on racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic propaganda on the Internet, we have met here today to hold the third meeting of a series of meetings organized by the OSCE in 2004 on the problems of intolerance. This series of meetings, which was decided on at the Maastricht Ministerial Council meeting in December 2003, provides an excellent opportunity for the 55 OSCE participating States to reflect and exchange ideas on the current situation regarding intolerance in our societies, whether it is a matter of anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia or discrimination, including situations when these pernicious ideologies and practices are transmitted via the Internet.

Like so many other countries, France has not been spared this resurgence of a dark past. Given its rich tradition of openness and its diversity, France feels a particular responsibility in our common response. From the very beginning, therefore, it has fully involved itself in this response, in the belief that the questions at issue are of fundamental importance in the current situation. In fact, our societies, which are increasingly open to the world and to the globalization of images and messages and which are confronted by

crossborder terrorist violence, must resolutely promote the values of respect, dignity and tolerance. These values represent the only proper response in societies that are and will become increasingly heterogeneous and multi-cultural.

At Berlin, we showed ourselves to be up to the challenge. The scourge of anti-Semitism must be fought without any concessions and with vigour and determination.

France has also taken the position that the development of new media must be accompanied by careful monitoring and by education and a raising of awareness. It was this approach that was at the heart of our discussions at the Paris meeting. In a few months' time, the Ministerial Council meeting in Sofia will provide us with an opportunity to take specific measures to follow up these two conferences.

Today, we are gathered here in Brussels to go one step further and confirm our commitment. What kind of damage will our societies suffer if we tolerate racism and xenophobia? What kind of abyss will we fall into if we have to come to terms with intolerance?

We are all aware of the attraction an enlarged Europe exerts on the rest of the world. Migration flows will to a very large extent shape the face and future of our societies. Today, we must give thought to the conditions for the acceptance and integration of migrants and their families. We also need to encourage respect for cultural, religious and ethnic diversity in our democratic societies. This is the meaning, for example, of the secularism that France has been promoting and putting into effect for nearly 100 years. I shall return to this point later on.

We undertook certain commitments in Berlin and we must uphold them. We also undertook certain commitments in Paris and we must uphold those commitments as well. As part of our assessment today of the risks associated with racism, xenophobia and discrimination in all its forms, we shall also have here in Brussels to assume collectively certain commitments that we shall also have to follow through on. These commitments will involve two complementary levels — the national and the international.

At a purely national level, each of our countries has developed its own response. France's approach does not claim to represent some sort of model and is one among many others. My country has adopted a law increasing the penalties to be imposed on those guilty of acts of racism, anti-Semitism or discrimination. An inter-ministerial committee on racism and anti-Semitism has also been established. France has also set up an integration council consisting of members of civil society involved in combating racism and discrimination.

These bodies have made their appearance at a time when important new laws and statutes are coming on the books to define and punish acts of discrimination in access to employment, to housing, or, quite simply, to public or recreational places. In addition to the adoption of more severe laws, there have also been improvements in their enforcement thanks to constant vigilance on the part of human rights associations and non-governmental organizations involved in combating racism and discrimination.

Other partners have made other choices. This plurality of experience should give rise to creative exchanges. There can never be too many of us giving thought to these matters

when the stakes are as high as they are. In that regard, the OSCE could serve as a laboratory for testing and making known experience at the national level.

Even more than devising stricter laws, we must promote tolerance, mutual respect and an awareness of others. In that regard, schools have an essential role to play. France is committed to the secularism of its State schools, seeing in this a factor for integration and an opportunity for dialogue, guaranteeing respect for every pupil by prohibiting proselytism in the classroom. This concern to protect the consciences of the youngest members of society is the key to understanding what is commonly referred to as “secularism à la française”.

Some of our partners are in favour of allowing displays of religious affiliation on the part of the various communities that live within their confine. That is their right. We, on the other hand, believe that freedom of conscience is best achieved by ensuring that schools remain a neutral place. The freedom of all flourishes best when each individual is able to live intimately his or her own convictions without imposing them on others. In France, this debate arose as long as 100 years ago. The terms of the debate have certainly changed, but it is mainly the face of our countries that has been transformed.

But all our schools are called upon to react to these new challenges and all educational systems must be mobilized to meet them. A comparison of experiences will produce the only valid response: a change of mind that will lay dry the well springs of intolerance.

At an international level, and especially within the framework provided to us by the OSCE, we must primarily stress prevention, awareness-raising, education and exchange of good practices as part of a partnership approach fully involving governments and NGOs. It is the daily application of the documents and treaties to which our countries are party that must be facilitated thanks to these arrangements. The fight for a world in which all human beings, conscious of their shared destiny, will act together to safeguard that destiny must be extended to all areas. This is the spirit in which France brought together representatives of civil society, anti-racism and anti-xenophobia associations and Internet professionals at the Paris meeting.

The rise of intolerance makes it imperative that we succeed. This question will be at the heart of our discussions during the Ministerial Council meeting in Sofia in December of this year. Let us be more ambitious and even more demanding in the goals that we set ourselves. We must propose not only a diagnosis but also remedies for these evils, which risk eating away at our societies. Intolerance is intolerable in all its forms. It is only through a collective approach that we shall be able to meet this most serious challenge at the start of the twenty-first century. It is a question of survival for us all.

Thank you.