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*Session III : Places of Worship*

Mr Chairman,

On behalf of the delegation of the Republic of Serbia I would like to thank Prof. Durham and Ms. Fokina for their interesting introductions. As I announced yesterday, my delegation would like to draw your attention to the existing problems with respect to religious freedoms in our southern province of Kosovo and Metohija, in particular those related to the places of worship.

It is widely known that since a decade now Serbian churches and monasteries in Kosovo have been the subject of an orchestrated campaign of cultural cleansing that continues until the present day. Around 150 Serbian Orthodox shrines, churches, monasteries and cemeteries have completely been razed to the ground, damaged or desecrated. In Kosovo we find a situation that is unique in Europe and beyond it – many of the Serbian Orthodox places of worship there have to be protected by barbed wire and/ or international troops.

Let me underline at this point that the conflict that marked and still marks the relations between the communities in Kosovo is not a religious, but an ethnical one. That means that Serbs are a target as an ethnic group with the implication that everything that is Serbian is submitted to discrimination or attacks, including churches, monasteries as well as the religious life of Serbs in Kosovo. When we speak about Serbian cultural and religious heritage in Kosovo we have to be clear: This is the religious and cultural heritage of all Serbs – of Serbs living in Kosovo, but also of Serbs living in central Serbia or outside the country. The sacred Serbian Orthodox monuments in Kosovo are an essential part of our national identity and this is why they play an important role for our people wherever they live. However, we are witnesses not only to the destruction of those monuments, but also to the tendency to rename and reregister Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo and Metohija as the “property of Kosovo”, to equal Serbian cultural and religious heritage with a general Kosovo heritage which clearly presents a distinct feature of ethnic cleansing.

Mr. Chairman,

If one looks for striking examples of intolerance against Christians in today's Europe, in the OSCE area, one should go to Kosovo. Allow me to recall, for instance, the case of the remains of a Serbian church in downtown Djakovica, burned down during the March 2004 pogrom, which in July last year were whipped from the face of the earth. This happened in broad daylight, and in plain sight of the local Albanian population. Not a word of protest was spoken. Some persons even went so far as to ask, why the Serbs needed a church in the middle of Djakovica at all? Forgetting perhaps that ethnic cleansing was the cause of the lack of a Serbian population in this town. Let me remind you that around 200 000 IDPs from Kosovo reside in other parts of Serbia and the process of their return is more than slow - it virtually does not exist. And how could they return to Djakovica, for example, where their cultural and religious heritage is disrespected in such a striking way?

Mr. Chairman,

Where places of worship are physically endangered, how can the religious life of the priests, monks, nuns or the community be safe and free? Another telling testimony of the "religious freedoms" in Kosovo is the way in which Kosovo Serbs have to mark their religious holidays or to commemorate their dead – in many cases they have to be escorted by police to the churches and the cemeteries. And in most cases they find the Orthodox graveyards vandalized, the tombstones demolished, the graves overgrown by weeds or excavated, and smaller monuments or objects like marble vases taken away. These facts sadly show that Serbs in Kosovo still are not able to exercise their religious rights and freedoms, one of their fundamental right – the freedom of movement – being continuously endangered.

Having said this, Mr. Chairman, we strongly believe that the protection and reconstruction of Serbian Orthodox cultural and religious heritage – some of the monuments being on UNESCO's World Heritage List – should be amongst the problems that need to be addressed urgently and properly, by taking into account the importance and sensitivity of the issue and by including all relevant stakeholders - the Serbian Orthodox Church, representatives of Belgrade, UNMIK and the Kosovo provisional institutions, the European Commission and others.

We also call on the OSCE, on ODIHR and the OSCE Mission in Kosovo to strengthen their efforts in adequately monitoring and reporting on the protection of the Serbian Orthodox cultural and religious heritage, as well as the respect of freedom of religion or belief of all non-Albanian communities in Kosovo, and in this way to make a valuable contribution to combating intolerance and discrimination against Christians in the OSCE area.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman