Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

REMARKS

addressed by
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to the

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Mr Chairman,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In many regions of the OSCE area interethnic relations continue to give cause for concern. We must take special note of the expressions of extreme nationalism which have tended to become more frequent in recent years and which have an impact on relations between majority and minorities. Over the years we have learned that lack of understanding between majority and minority can create tensions which in turn can develop into violent conflict. Indeed most contemporary conflicts have been driven by interethnic or religious friction, a circumstance which has taken on massive dimensions in Africa, with deeply tragic consequences.

In our part of the world the situation is better than in Africa, in the sense that interethnic tensions are not usually fuelled by poverty, epidemics and illiteracy. But even in the affluent West, we can observe how migration and the emergence of new minorities have led to tension and, in some instances, social unrest in participating States. I have repeatedly drawn the international community's attention, including the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, to the complexity and potential impact on society of the emergence of new minorities and to the urgency of starting to reflect on how the OSCE, and indeed the HCNM, can address these situations early on in order to prevent them from developing into serious societal confrontation. The methods and practices traditionally employed by the HCNM within its remit of operations could also be usefully applied in these new minority situations. This of course does not exclude the HCNM from continuing to direct its main attention and responsibility, in accordance with its mandate, towards the large number of questions concerning established national minority issues, whether in the Balkans, the Baltics, Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The common denominator in all these regions is the fact that they include States that have to meet the challenge of creating a new identity in the wake of the collapse of the socialist one-party system. National issues and by definition their ethnic, religious and minority dimension, have been a core element in this process. Potential for tension and conflict within and between States in this context is obvious. Considering that a fundamental task of the OSCE, and indeed the HCNM, is conflict prevention, my engagement in these regions is particularly intense.

As a matter of fact the institution of HCNM is unique in an international context. Nowhere else in the world does there exist a corresponding mechanism within an international institution authorized to engage in the internal political affairs of a State. That this has been possible at all was based upon the fact of trust between the OSCE participating States in 1992 when the institution was established and the requirement of confidentiality in the operations of the High Commissioner on National Minorities was instituted.

Thus as High Commissioner on National Minorities, I am expected to involve myself in addressing tension between majority and minority within a State in order to prevent a particular situation from developing into friction and even full-scale violence, with potential even for international conflagration. Obviously, I must gather reliable information and be able to identify indicators of possible problems in concrete cases. Every situation is specific, however experience has taught me that certain common denominators reappear. Key questions to be addressed are problems involving minority education and language use, minorities' participation in political bodies as well as in administrative and executive bodies,

not least in the police force, as well as matters connected to citizenship, cultural expressions and repatriation and minority related property issues. The HCNM has to identify the issues which are in dispute and propose solutions, frequently through draft proposals for legislation.

When ethnic groups appear unwilling to live together, the easy answer may appear to be a separation of the conflicting groups by dividing a State into separate entities according to ethnicity. However such a solution creates new problems and can become a hotbed of international conflict. The dream of ethnically pure nation States carries with it the threat of forced separation, displacement and deportation. Policies of separation run counter to the fundamental principle of integration, which I consider a cornerstone of the OSCE approach to international security.

From my point of view, integration does not mean involuntary assimilation. It means living together in tolerance of and mutual respect for differences in culture, religion, language and historic perceptions. Integration in a multiethnic society encompassing such differences is difficult and challenging. But is an absolute necessity if the forces for separation and conflict are not to win out.

The special advantages the HCNM brings to addressing majority/minority problems in its area of operations, lie in its local presence and meetings in confidence with those directly affected by the ethnic or religious tension, the methods of integration proposed and its special expertise of applying international norms to specific situations.

In this respect, I work closely with leading norm-giving bodies such as the Council of Europe. Over the last few years, I have also developed important contacts with the European Commission, especially in the context of the enlargement process, to which the HCNM has

contributed through engaging in minority related problems in order to ease the accession of candidate countries.

Furthermore, I have been actively engaged in the ultimately successful efforts to incorporate into the EU constitution the respect for the rights of persons belonging to minorities as a fundamental value of the Union.

Thus the significance of such a notion for international peace and the security of the rights of minorities, interethnic harmony and integration with respect for diversity is gaining understanding and recognition. It is now only left for us to bring this insight to bear on the concrete problems confronting us today.

I thank you.