



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement at the Informal Briefing on Internally Displaced Persons

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
Informal Briefing,
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Thank you, Mr. Moderator. The United States repeatedly has urged the OSCE to address the issue of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and we therefore warmly welcome this informal briefing and information exchange on the Role of National and International Protection in Internal Displacement.

The overview of existing protection arrangements for the internally displaced will help OSCE participating States understand their responsibilities for protection, assistance, and solutions for IDPs. Let me stress here that the protection of IDPs is an OSCE-wide issue, with some three million internally displaced persons in the region, spanning Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Central Europe.

This meeting has been useful in helping us consider possible ways the OSCE can assist participating States in implementing their OSCE commitments relating to displacement. Specifically, participating States have committed to "facilitate the voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons in dignity and safety." The international community has been struggling to develop a system of response with regard to IDPs. In many countries, IDPs exist in refugee-like situations, having fled violence en masse, and relocated to camps or temporary shelters within their countries, unable to return. They have limited access to health care, education, economic opportunities, and legal remedies.

Not having crossed an international border, IDPs are afforded no protection by the UN Refugee Convention, despite having similar needs to those of refugees.

The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, while not a binding document, provides a useful framework for the protection of IDPs, as they restate international commitments from a variety of agreements and conventions.

One priority of the United States at the Maastricht Ministerial, which I believe many other participating States share, is to obtain an OSCE Ministerial Commitment that welcomes the UN Guiding Principles, as a useful framework for guiding the work of the OSCE and the actions of participating States in dealing with internal displacement.

By welcoming the Principles, the OSCE would be better equipped to provide technical assistance to those countries that have IDP populations on their territories.

For example, upon request, the OSCE could assist participating States in reviewing and revising national legislation frameworks incorporating the effective approach outlined in the Guiding Principles.

Other specific OSCE activities could include raising awareness among OSCE field Missions of the Guiding Principles and other rights often not enjoyed by IDPs, such as ensuring that IDPs have the right to vote and that they receive all documents necessary for the enjoyment and exercise of their legal rights, such as passports, personal identification documents, birth certificates and marriage certificates.

It is vital that the OSCE and affected participating States pay attention to the full range of options for IDPs. States should facilitate the work of international and non-governmental agencies providing IDP assistance. States should minimize bureaucratic obstacles that hinder IO/NGO communication networks, impose unwieldy administrative requirements, and contribute to creating insecure work environments.

Furthermore, while participating States with IDP populations have the responsibility to “facilitate sustainable solutions” for the displaced to return voluntarily, in safety and dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence, they also have the responsibility to help facilitate the voluntary resettlement in another part of the country for those not wishing to return to their places of origin.

We urge the OSCE and all participating States to take necessary steps to prevent and avoid conditions that lead to internal displacement, to assist those who do become displaced, and to increase their attention to the needs of those displaced persons voluntarily desiring resettlement.

Lastly, in keeping with the emphasis the U.S. would like to see placed on this issue, we would also urge the OSCE to hold a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on IDPs and the protection of their rights next year. Such a meeting could explore further what OSCE commitments and/or activities are needed to allow IDPs to fully realize their rights.

In closing, the millions of internally displaced persons throughout the OSCE region are in highly vulnerable situations and in great need of assistance. I urge all those gathered around this table to uphold their OSCE commitments, and to welcome the UN Guiding Principles and to hold a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on this subject matter that affects several millions of people. Thank you.