



United States Mission to the OSCE

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting Opening Plenary Statement

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, September 24, 2007

Mr. Moderator,

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the convening of the Belgrade Follow-up Meeting, the first meeting of the then-35 participating States specifically mandated to review implementation of commitments contained in the Helsinki Final Act. In his opening statement, Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, who headed the U.S. delegation in Belgrade, spoke of the duty of those gathered to conduct a candid review of the promises each government had made – the promises we have kept, and the promises yet to be fulfilled. Academician and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov summed it up well when he observed, “The whole point of the Helsinki Accords is mutual monitoring, not mutual evasion of difficult problems.”

The dedication to the enduring principles enshrined in the Final Act and the perseverance of those, like Sakharov, who have preceded us, has had a remarkable impact throughout the expansive OSCE region. Seemingly impenetrable barriers to freedom crumbled before our eyes and ostensibly monolithic structures of repression withered away. Change, ushered in, in no small measure by the Helsinki Process, has translated into freer lives for millions of individuals throughout the region. This transformation was brought about first and foremost by courageous citizens calling for change in their own countries.

This year also marks fifteen years of OSCE membership for more than a dozen countries represented at this table. While our ranks have expanded significantly, taking into account new realities, our purpose remains unchanged: to uphold liberty and promote peaceful democratic change based on shared principles and commitments.

Our task, as the title of our meeting makes clear, is to review implementation of these commonly held commitments – the accountability, if you will, of the process. My delegation values this annual implementation review meeting, where NGOs are able to participate directly and have their voices heard.

The late-UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, in commemorating the Virginia Declaration of Human Rights, observed, ““Freedom from fear,” could be said to sum up the whole philosophy of human rights.” Not surprisingly, fear remains the common tool of regimes that view freedom and human rights with cynicism and contempt.

Moderator, from the earliest days of the Helsinki Process, fearless individuals have stepped forward to speak out when Final Act commitments have not been honored. Most did so at great personal risk, some paying for their activism with their very lives.

The United States is concerned that one of the most fundamental elements of Helsinki Final Act's Guiding Principles – Principle VII – is not being adequately protected. In too many parts of the OSCE region, the right of individuals “to know and act upon [their] rights” is under threat, if not outright attack. We welcome the particular attention being paid by the OSCE to the plight of human rights defenders and urge continued focus on these brave men and women.

Human rights defenders continue to play a vital role in our common work, often resulting in repercussions for themselves or their families. Similarly, journalists who report negatively on the government, including by examining crucial allegations of corruption, are sometimes harassed, faced with malicious or trumped up legal charges, or, in the worst cases, murdered. Likewise, political parties that might challenge the government or provide critical views of the regime in power may find themselves unable to register – or worse. Key elements of civil society, human rights defenders, journalists, and opposition figures are often targeted by repressive regimes.

In Belarus, Aleksandr Kozulin continues to sit in a prison cell for the crime of protesting the results of an election that we in the OSCE declared to be flawed. Recently, another dissident, Andrey Klimov was convicted and sentenced in July in a closed trial for publishing material on the Internet criticizing the Lukashenka regime. Earlier this year, Klimov was released from custody after completing an 18-month sentence in "internal exile" for organizing a public protest. Police arrested those peacefully protesting the politically motivated trials of Young Front members; and political parties planning to take part in parliamentary elections next year have been threatened with de-registration.

The situation for human rights defenders and independent journalists in Uzbekistan remains grim, in a relentless campaign of harassment and intimidation following the 2005 uprising in Andijon.

Concerns persist with respect to incidents in the Russian Federation of harassment of selected human rights defenders, particularly those involved in cases or issues, such as Chechnya, considered sensitive to the current ruling elites. At least one opposition activists was detained in a psychiatric hospital, reminiscent of past abuses of psychiatry. We also recall the slaying of journalists Anna Politkovskaya a year ago and the dozen or so of her colleagues murdered because they delved into issues not to the liking of some. We are also watching the implementation of the 2006 NGO law. We are particularly concerned that the Federal Registration Service has used this law to investigate and issue formal warnings to the Bellona and Citizens' Watch NGOs. The ability of such organizations to work freely is fundamental to the functioning of a democracy.

Likewise, we remain concerned about the intensified crack-down against independent and opposition journalists in Azerbaijan and continuing constraints on freedom of association and assembly.

“The history of liberty,” as President Woodrow Wilson noted, “is a history of limitations of government power, not the increase of it.” In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the participating States have recognized that “pluralistic democracy and the rule of law are essential for ensuring respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Antithetical to pluralism is the “president for life” model and other forms of manipulation of the political system adopted by several participating States, including most recently by Kazakhstan.

Moderator, while millions across the OSCE region have come to enjoy new found freedoms over the years, others continue to be denied their human rights and fundamental freedoms. One of the tremendous strengths of the Helsinki Process is the considerable body of agreed human rights commitments we share in word, if not in deed.

In September of 1752, a seemingly ordinary bell was delivered to the American colonial capital of Philadelphia, engraved with this simple, yet powerful inscription: “Proclaim Liberty Throughout All The Land Unto All The Inhabitants Thereof.”

Moderator, colleagues, my delegation looks forward to candid and meaningful engagement with partners – participating States and NGOs alike – in hopes of bringing liberty that much closer to those for whom its ring remains strikingly distant, for now.