

United States Mission to the OSCE

Closing Plenary Session

As prepared for delivery by Michael Posner
U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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Mr. Moderator, Distinguished Colleagues,

I am Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. This is my first appearance at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. I appreciate this opportunity to express the United States' strong dedication to the Helsinki Final Act and the OSCE's Human Dimension commitments, as well as to the OSCE's institutions and field missions that are working to transform those commitments into practice.

Two weeks ago, President Obama addressed the U.N. General Assembly. He called for a new era of U.S. engagement with the world. He expressed his determination that the United States be a leader in meeting complex challenges to global prosperity and peace. And he emphasized that respect for human rights and democracy is essential to sustained prosperity and lasting security.

This address built on themes he sounded in speeches in Cairo, Moscow, and Accra earlier this year. Accordingly, our approach here and elsewhere is guided by three tenets: a commitment to principled engagement; a determination that all – including ourselves -- are responsible for upholding universal principles of human rights and humanitarian law; and a fidelity to the truth.

Engagement. The United States is deeply committed to the OSCE and its comprehensive concept of security. The Obama Administration is reinvigorating U.S. engagement in the OSCE. We are participating actively in the Corfu process to ensure that the OSCE – including its Human Dimension – is strengthened to meet 21st century challenges. We seek to tackle OSCE's greatest task: improving implementation of OSCE commitments. To this end, we value the work of the director of the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and his expert staff, the Representative on Freedom of the Media, the three Tolerance Representatives, and the High Commissioner for National Minorities.

We stand ready to engage in open, constructive discussions on improving the OSCE's effectiveness. We will not, however, support efforts that could undermine OSCE principles or institutions.

The second tenet of our approach is universality. We are dedicated to upholding the principles reflected in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, embodied in international law, and enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent OSCE agreements. President Obama's decision on his second day in office to end abusive interrogations, to close the detention facility

at Guantanamo and to review security detention policies more generally are emblematic of our commitment to apply universal principles to ourselves.

Our own record has been a matter for discussion here. We take our Human Dimension commitments seriously and we do not consider expressions of concern about our record to be interference in our internal affairs. We have made every effort to respond to specific concerns, though it has been difficult to address unsourced or vague criticisms. We stand ready to respond as specifics are provided.

Telling the Truth. The third tenet of our approach here and elsewhere is telling the truth about human rights conditions. We have emphasized our deep concern about increasing incidents of discrimination and violence. In some participating States, fundamental freedoms of thought, conscience, religion or belief, expression, peaceful assembly, and association continue to be denied. So-called “extremism” laws, onerous requirements and “defamation” laws constrain the legitimate, peaceful activities of civil society.

Human rights defenders and journalists all too often are themselves targets of persecution. The anonymous, lethal attack on Natalia Estemirova, and three years ago this week on Anna Politkovskaya, are disquieting reminders of the risks human rights defenders face. This deepening climate of intimidation and impunity is antithetical to the rule of law.

It is precisely in areas like this, where the gap between commitment and implementation is greatest, that we must focus our efforts.

We encourage the upcoming Chair of the OSCE, Kazakhstan, to ensure that the OSCE will continue to enhance its capacity to tackle tough Human Dimension issues. We call upon Kazakhstan to show leadership by example and to make steady progress toward meeting all of its Madrid commitments, including reducing criminal liability for defamation. We also look to Kazakhstan to ensure that any future changes to the religion law meet OSCE commitments.

We call upon all parties to fulfill their ceasefire commitments with respect to the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. We urge the continued active participation of Russia and Georgia in the Geneva talks aimed at facilitating security and stability in the region and addressing humanitarian and human rights issues there, including full access for international humanitarian groups.

We look forward to exchanging ideas with governments and NGOs as we shape proposals in the Human Dimension for consideration at the OSCE Ministerial in December.

Let me add a final word on the important contributions of NGOs and civil society. This has been and will be a major theme for President Obama and Secretary Clinton. The subject has special resonance for me because I have spent the past thirty plus years working as an NGO human rights advocate. We have heard concerns about the active NGO participation here. Some participating States have suggested that new constraints be placed on NGO participation. My government strongly disagrees. The participation of NGOs on an equal footing with government officials is what makes the HDIM such a valuable forum.

I look forward to working with OSCE colleagues to advance human dignity and the Human Dimension of the Helsinki Final Act. On behalf of the U.S. Delegation, I wish to thank the Government of Poland and the ODIHR for being such welcoming and gracious hosts.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.