



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### **Closing Plenary Statement**

As prepared for delivery by Assistant Secretary Barry F. Lowenkron  
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting  
Warsaw, October 13, 2006

Mr. Chair, Distinguished Colleagues:

I am Barry Lowenkron, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. I appreciate this opportunity to join Ambassador Finley in reaffirming the United States' strong commitment to the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, the Human Dimension of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the work of the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

During the course of this meeting, the United States delegation has shared our thoughts on challenges of implementation facing fellow participating States. We have also heard the concerns of others regarding our own performance. The policies and practices of all participating States are legitimate subjects for discussion, and we welcome the fact that other states, including those addressing comments to us, accept that principle. We have tried to answer the concerns raised with us fully and forthrightly in keeping with our OSCE commitments.

We also have also benefited from the exchange of ideas with other governments, parliamentarians and non-governmental representatives regarding the broad range of OSCE's ongoing work in the Human Dimension. Many of these issues have been discussed here in Warsaw over the past two weeks, and we look forward to continuing our efforts regarding them in 2007.

My government strongly supports and is committed to, in particular, the reappointment of the three Personal Representatives to promote tolerance and non-discrimination and the holding of a high-level conference in Romania in 2007 based on the model of the 2005 Cordoba Conference on Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance. All participating States must recommit to fighting intolerance within our societies and to prosecuting those who commit hate crimes. I want to emphasize that my government is prepared to consider Copenhagen-Plus ideas to update and strengthen existing commitments on elections.

As you know, with France and Belgium, we are working on an initiative for the Brussels Ministerial against the Sexual Exploitation of Children, and we are encouraged by the soundings we have taken thus far. Combating sexual exploitation of children -- including child pornography, prostitution, and sex tourism -- are issues worthy of focus at the Human Dimension Seminar in 2007. The discrimination in housing often suffered by Roma perhaps could be a topic for a Supplementary Human Dimension next year.

Mr. Chair, I would like to devote the remainder of this closing statement to two issues that my government regards as critical to progress in the Human Dimension and OSCE as a whole. The first is the importance of supporting and strengthening the ODIHR, and the

second is the need to support and defend the vital role that non-governmental organizations play in advancing human rights and democracy.

As Secretary of State Rice has said: “(T)he Helsinki process has not just borne witness to historic transformations, the Helsinki process has helped to bring those transformations about.” For fifteen years, the ODIHR has helped in concrete ways to further these transformations from dictatorship to democracy across Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia. ODIHR has worked in partnership with governments and NGOs to strengthen the rule of law, civil society and democratic institutions, foster free and fair elections, promote tolerance, combat anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred, ensure the equal rights of men and women and eradicate trafficking in persons. These tasks, by their very nature, require a determined, long-term effort. The participating States of the OSCE have solemnly committed themselves to making such an effort.

Establishing accountable, democratic systems of government under which human rights are respected is not a linear process, however. When I meet with Secretary Rice, the question that comes up most about democracy in any given country is: “What is the trajectory?” Is the country more responsive to its citizens? Is a culture of just laws taking root? Some countries remain fragile for quite some time. Others backslide. There is no such thing as a perfect democracy. I and my colleagues have mentioned individual countries and concerns during the course of this HDIM and it is incumbent upon every country, including my own, to uphold the principles of this organization, including tolerance, rule of law, and minority rights. All democracies must constantly work to bring their reality ever closer to our shared ideals.

In some participating States, democratic transitions are still in early stages and they have a long way to go. Indeed, in some states, it is hard to see even much of a start. And it is precisely in those areas where the gap between principle and performance is widest that our Helsinki commitments as well as our common sense require us to focus ODIHR’s work.

It is no coincidence that ODIHR encounters the stiffest resistance in countries such as Belarus, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where the challenges to democratic reform are greatest.

The response to such resistance is not to train less attention on the tough challenges or to constrain the ODIHR. On the contrary, it is to strengthen ODIHR’s capacity to help meet those challenges. We must maintain a sharp focus on the gaps between promise and practice, and not be distracted by attempts to deflect attention from violations of OSCE commitments.

To be sure, as an accountable institution, the ODIHR should be open to constructive proposals for improvement. Over time, ODIHR must adjust to tackle new challenges and seize new opportunities. ODIHR, in fact, has been doing that. My government will entertain any idea that would strengthen ODIHR, but we will not agree to any proposal that would diminish ODIHR’s capacity to carry out its essential work.

What Secretary Rice said last year about OSCE as a whole on the eve of the Helsinki Final Act’s 30th anniversary also applies to ODIHR, and I quote: “preserving the integrity of the Helsinki principles and ensuring that OSCE continues to be an agent of peaceful, democratic transformation should be paramount objectives. Any new procedures should not come at the

expense of principle, and any institutional reforms should be geared to strengthening OSCE's ability to produce results on the ground, particularly through its field missions."

ODIHR has earned and deserves our strong support.

I will now turn to the work of NGOs. Human Dimension Implementation Meetings such as these affirm the partnership between the OSCE and NGOs. The contributions of civil society organizations remain vital to fulfilling the promise of the Helsinki Final Act.

As Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, I frequently meet with NGOs who want to discuss the U.S. Government's human rights record at home and abroad. We do not always agree. But I never view their opinions or work as a threat. Indeed, NGOs' contributions to the debate on America's role in the world can only strengthen our democracy.

In today's world, the problems confronting states are too complex even for the most powerful governments to tackle alone. The work of NGOs is crucial in addressing a host of domestic and international challenges. Restricting the political space of NGOs only limits a society's own political and economic growth.

Yet, in many countries across the globe, and regrettably in some OSCE participating States, we see the adoption and application of restrictive NGO laws and burdensome regulations, or extralegal attempts to intimidate NGOs or shut them down. Just yesterday, we heard reports that the Russian Chechen Friendship Society was shut down by the Russian courts; this marks a troubling application of a restrictive NGO law. Despite such attempts, I am encouraged to note that many brave NGO representatives from a number of the participating States in question have participated in this meeting.

Mr. Chair, when NGOs are under siege, democracy is undermined. The OSCE has adopted some of the world's most advanced provisions regarding the role and rights of NGOs. A major focus of our efforts must be championing the efforts of NGOs as they foster peaceful, democratic change.

By insisting from the inception that the Helsinki Final Act's words become deeds, courageous human rights defenders greatly advanced the cause of freedom and peace on this continent. And here I would like to associate myself with the many expressions of shock, sadness and concern registered this week regarding the brutal murder of Anna Politkovskaya.

The Final Act's pioneering principles linking security among states to respect for human rights within states remain at the heart of the Helsinki process to this day. And our most compelling task as OSCE states remains to work with one another and with NGOs and other human rights defenders to put those principles into practice.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and Distinguished Colleagues, for the opportunity to address this body. On behalf of the entire U.S. Delegation, I also wish to thank the Government of Poland and the ODIHR for being such welcoming hosts.