



**Statement by Joëlle Fiss,
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**Roundtable on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians
Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)**

Vienna, March 4, 2009

Violence Against Christians

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to attend today's OSCE Roundtable on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians on behalf of Human Rights First. I would like to thank the ODIHR and the OSCE Chairmanship for its efforts to promote tolerance and combat racism, xenophobia and discrimination and for organizing this meeting and inviting me to introduce our work.

Human Rights First is a New York-based NGO, which believes that building respect for human rights and the rule of law will help ensure the dignity to which every individual is entitled and will stem tyranny, extremism, intolerance, and violence. Through the Fighting Discrimination Program, Human Rights First seeks to combat discrimination by reversing the tide of anti-Christian, antisemitic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim violence and reducing other bias crime in the OSCE region. In September 2008, we released our 2008 Hate Crime Survey, which documented a rise in hate crimes across many parts of Europe and North America. The Survey contained separate sections on *Violence Based on Religious Intolerance*, *Violence against Muslims*, *Antisemitic Violence*, *Violence Based on Racism and Xenophobia*, *Violence Against Roma*, and *Violence Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Bias*. Our reporting looks

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broadly across the OSCE region. But we also included separate sections on hate crime in the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the United States. Those sections contain specific recommendations to the respective governments. The work of the Fighting Discrimination Program complements international bodies that address hate crimes (OSCE, Council of Europe, EU, etc).

Our reports are available free of charge at <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/discrimination/>.

Hate crimes remain a key threat to our societies. Among the findings of our 2008 survey, the following conclusions were reached:

- **Racist and xenophobic violence rose in several of the 56 countries of the OSCE in 2007.** Although comprehensive and systematic data collection systems are unavailable in most OSCE states, government monitoring systems in a number of countries showed **moderate to high rises in the overall numbers** of hate crimes in 2006 and 2007. These include **Finland, Ireland, the Slovak Republic, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.**

Information from nongovernmental monitors provided evidence of rising levels of racist violence in 2007 in **Greece, Italy, the Russian Federation, Switzerland, and Ukraine.** Available figures may only be the tip of the iceberg, however. Media and NGO surveys suggest that in many cases violence was not being reported to or recorded by police.

- **Roma and Sinti** face violent hate crimes and a myriad of other forms of public and private discrimination throughout Europe. A pattern of violence is directed at causing immediate harm to Roma and physically eradicating the presence of Roma in towns and communities in many parts of Europe. Racist violence against Roma remains gravely underreported. The most widely reported incidents occurred in **Italy**, where thousands of Roma were driven from their homes in 2007 when mobs attacked, beating residents and burning Roma settlements to the ground, as police reportedly did not intervene in several cases to protect the victims. Violent incidents have also been reported in **Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Russian Federation, Serbia, and Slovakia.**
- Continuing **violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity bias**, though still largely unseen, is an intimidating day-to-day reality for people who describe themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (together, “LGBT”), as well as others who are targeted because they do not conform to stereotypes of gender identity or simply advocate for LGBT rights. None of the official reports suggest that incidents are decreasing; government data in some countries, as well as credible nongovernmental reports, suggest an increase.

Very few countries collect and publish data on the issue or even list LGBT as a form of hate crime in their criminal law provisions. Gay pride parades and events in Eastern Europe continue to result in political diatribes attacking people of minority sexual orientations from political leaders, inadequate police protection, and acts of harassment and violence against the participants. Homosexuality remains criminalized in two OSCE Member States, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Hate crimes also target the Christian community. Human Rights First is aware of many cases of violence against individuals, vandalism and attacks on property and desecration of burial sites. Violence motivated by anti-Christian bias continued to be increasing in many countries in Europe and North America in 2007 and 2008.

In some countries, members of Christian minorities are subject to violent attacks, reflecting longstanding tensions between minority religious groups and the majority religious community. In other cases, adherents of religions that are new or are perceived to be nontraditional in a particular area are the targets of violence. For example:

- Members of nontraditional Christian denominations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were among those targeted for violence, sometimes in the context of government restrictions on religious activities and official campaigns of vilification.
- In the United States, violent attacks on Christian religious institutions sometimes combined antipathy toward particular confessions with hatred motivated by the racial makeup of their congregations.

Government officials are not always neutral with regard to such tensions and disputes, and may exacerbate them or create the atmosphere in which violent acts take place, as well as influencing the way such violent acts are addressed by the authorities. In several countries, governments have enforced restrictions on religious activity, specifically targeting minority religious groups and beliefs. In extreme cases, religious activities that are not approved by the authorities are criminalized, while official approval of religious activities by some groups is arbitrarily withheld. Government security forces and law enforcement officials have harassed or committed other abuses against persons engaged in religious activities, forcefully breaking up religious services, confiscating property, and fining or detaining religious leaders and other participants.

With or without such government action, officials at times condone or fail to refute vilification against some religious minority groups in the state or private media. In particularly egregious cases, law enforcement officials participate in attacks or fail to intervene and provide protection to members of religious minorities.

More examples can be found by reading the full report on Violence Based on Religious Intolerance, available at <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/discrimination/pages.aspx?id=150>.

Human Rights First recommends that governments do more to combat hate crimes, including violence motivated by anti-Christian bias, first by enhancing data collection systems on hate crimes:

- The EU Fundamental Rights Agency determined that only 11 of the 27 member states have criminal justice data collection systems that are “good” or “comprehensive” in their coverage of hate crimes.
- Outside of the E.U., only Canada and the United States have well-developed reporting systems. Thus, only 13 of the 56 participating states of the OSCE are fulfilling their basic commitments to monitor hate crimes: **Austria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.**
- In **Russia**, where we view the situation as particularly problematic, a leading nongovernmental monitor of hate crimes documented nearly 100 racist and other bias-motivated murders in 2008, while official Russian data largely ignores this problem.
- In **Ukraine**, non-governmental organizations reported on a six-fold increase in racist attacks between 2006-2008. The government there does not yet report publicly on these crimes in line with their OSCE commitments, although has taken the first steps in establishing a hate crime registration system for police officers and prosecutors.
- Similarly, **Greece, Italy, and Spain** are among those countries where the authorities do not produce any reliable data on violent hate crimes, but where unofficial reports suggest an increasing number of such cases.
- In **Cyprus**, officials justified the fact that they did not submit any data on racist crimes to the E.U.’s Fundamental Rights Agency on the grounds that there is no racism there.
- The authorities in **Turkey** have similarly not reported on any cases of hate crimes – despite evidence to the contrary.

Human Rights First also calls on governments to improve its criminal provisions to respond to hate crimes:

- OSCE states have committed to developing adequate legislation to respond to hate crime.
- A growing number of the 56 countries in the OSCE are adopting criminal laws to expressly address violent hate crimes, largely in the form of penalty enhancement provisions.
- At present, there are **over 30 countries in which legislation treats at least some bias-motivated violent crime as a separate crime** or in which one or more forms of bias is regarded as an aggravating circumstance that can result in enhanced penalties.
- However, 23 OSCE countries still have no express provisions defining bias as an aggravating circumstance in the commission of a range of violent crimes against persons. They are: **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Macedonia, Monaco, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Poland, San Marino, Serbia, Slovenia, Switzerland, and Turkey.**