



United States Mission to the OSCE

Closing Session Statement

**As delivered by Ambassador Karen B. Stewart
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy,
Human Rights and Labor**

to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, October 10, 2008

Mister Chairman, Distinguished Colleagues:

I am Karen Stewart, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. I appreciate this opportunity to join Ambassador Pearson in expressing the United States' strong dedication to the Helsinki Final Act, to the Human Dimension commitments of the OSCE, and to the OSCE institutions and field missions working to transform those commitments into practice.

Let me begin by paying tribute, to a man of conscience and intellect, a courageous defender of human rights, and a statesman of great vision, the late Bronislaw Geremek. Mr. Geremek was among the first to see the potential of the Helsinki accords as an instrument for supporting the Solidarity movement here in Poland and as a spur to democratic change across Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. As we mourn Mr. Geremek's passing, we can best honor his memory by defending and advancing the human rights and the democratic values to which he dedicated his life.

Mister Chairman, over the past two weeks, the United States delegation has engaged in exchanges of views on challenges of implementation confronting the participating States. Our own record has been a matter for discussion not just by officials from the participating States, but also by non-governmental organizations, and we have welcomed those discussions. We take our Human Dimension commitments seriously and, in our good faith effort to meet those commitments, we value the vital role played by civil society. Whether or not we agree with comments or criticism directed at us, when others in the international community voice their views about our performance, we do not consider those expressions to be interference in our internal affairs, nor should other participating States regard expressions about their performance as such.

We also have welcomed the exchange of ideas with other governments and NGOs regarding OSCE's current activities and proposals for its onward work. We also appreciated the special focus on religious freedom this year. My delegation strongly supports the convening of a High-Level Conference in 2009 to follow up on the Bucharest and Cordoba meetings and discuss issues such as racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, Christians or other religious groups.

Mister Chairman, at this closing session, I would like to address myself to some fundamentals of the Helsinki process and of its Human Dimension.

There can be no lasting security without respect for fundamental freedoms. In this regard, Mister Chairman, my delegation reiterates the need, in keeping with the six-point ceasefire agreement, for international monitors to be given access to all of Georgia, especially the areas of conflict in and around the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, so that they can properly investigate all alleged violations of international law and abuses, and work to stop any that reportedly are ongoing -- such as the destruction of ethnic Georgian communities and the forced displacement of ethnic Georgians. We also emphasize that the Russian Federation bears responsibility for protecting from harm those who have remained and for ensuring public order and the safety of the civilian population in areas under the control of its forces.

Mister Chairman, without a serious Human Dimension, the OSCE would become a hollow exercise. The integrity and strength of the OSCE resides in the principles it enshrines and the high standards it upholds. My government has always been, and remains, ready to consider any ideas that enhance the OSCE's effectiveness. But my government will oppose any effort that -- either in its intent or its effect -- weakens OSCE principles and institutions, not least the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

As Secretary Rice has said: "preserving the integrity of the Helsinki principles and ensuring that the OSCE continues to be an agent of peaceful, democratic transformation should be paramount objectives."

In this regard, we look to the upcoming Chairs of the OSCE, Greece and Kazakhstan, to ensure that that during their tenures the OSCE not only loses no ground, but rather enhances its capacity to tackle tough Human Dimension issues. Just last week, Secretary Rice and Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Kramer traveled to Kazakhstan and took the opportunity to review with President Nazarbayev the commitments Kazakhstan made at the Madrid Ministerial, both to the OSCE and with regard to implementing democratic reforms within Kazakhstan. We call upon Kazakhstan to show leadership by example and, working closely with OSCE and civil society, to make steady progress toward meeting all of its Madrid commitments, including the adoption of laws governing independent media and elections. We also look to Kazakhstan to ensure that any changes to the religion law meet OSCE commitments.

Now, I would like to highlight a critical area of implementation where, as our HDIM discussions indicated, much work still needs to be done: that of ensuring respect for the fundamental freedoms of thought, conscience, religion or belief, expression, peaceful assembly and association. It is from these fundamental freedoms that the lifeblood of a healthy democracy flows. These freedoms are under siege today in a number of participating States. These states continue to abuse their power and misuse the law to pressure NGOs, journalists and others in civil society, and members of the political opposition. So-called "extremism" laws, onerous registration and tax requirements and "defamation" laws constrain the legitimate, peaceful activities of human rights defenders, non-governmental organizations, religious groups and the independent media. Recent years also have witnessed the threat or use of extra-legal means -- including lethal violence -- against members of the independent media in particular.

Due to the imposition of serious constraints on the exercise of fundamental freedoms, key elections in some participating States have fallen short -- in a number of cases -- egregiously short -- of OSCE

commitments. For our part, the United States has welcomed OSCE observers in the run-up to our elections in November.

Not surprisingly, it is from those participating States where fundamental freedoms are most challenged by government actions and democratic safeguards are the weakest, that we tend to hear the most criticism by state officials of the way the OSCE and its institutions and field missions conduct their work. Let me be clear: It is precisely where the distance between commitment and conduct is greatest that ODIHR and the OSCE in general must continue to concentrate their efforts.

Mister Chairman Chair and Distinguished Colleagues, my government remains ready to work with fellow participating States that are grappling in good faith with the challenges of democratic reform and striving to meet their OSCE commitments. We applaud the insightful and constructive work of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, the three Tolerance Representatives, the ODIHR Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the High Commissioner on National Minorities. And even as we keep the spotlight trained on areas where fundamental freedoms are not respected, we are encouraged by the concrete progress being made and chronicled here at this meeting, such as Slovakia's amendments to its anti-discrimination law and the capacity-building pilot project in Moldova to train human rights defenders.

Mister Chairman Chair, in closing, let me assure our fellow participating States that regardless of which candidate wins in our November elections, when our new President takes office in January 2009, the United States will remain strongly committed to advancing the cause of freedom 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.