



**Remarks by Isabel Santos, Chairperson of the General Committee on
Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions
OSCE PA Winter Meeting
Vienna, 19 February 2015**

Colleagues,
Distinguished Guests,

The power of recent events has meant that the fortieth anniversary of the OSCE is taking place at a dark time. It is also full of great challenges for the future. We face great challenges in our ability to, together, make this huge region a place of peace, democracy and respect for human rights.

The Baku Declaration contains a thorough assessment, helpfully highlighting problems and many worrying setbacks. But it also includes potential solutions, in our current context of geographic, cultural and political complexity.

Every day we hear new stories of conflicts, attempts to silence the media, the politically motivated detention of journalists, human rights defenders and politicians, abuses of the rule of law, the violation of basic democratic values, segregation of minorities, rejection of foreigners, and disrespect for human rights.

The participation in this meeting of senior OSCE representatives working on these issues will undoubtedly lead to deeper and more concerted deliberation. I welcome the opportunity for this exchange with the governmental side of our organization on these issues. I would like to warmly thank our guests for being here.

I am sure we have all been working hard between the meetings of this Committee in an effort to give substance and to implement the goals set in the annual declarations. I would like to share with you some the work that I have been doing as Chair of this Committee.

The dialogue I initiated last spring with the Kazakh authorities seems to have been an important episode, and I continue to engage and monitor certain ongoing reforms. More needs to be done, but I appreciate the dialogue we have.

At the Bureau's meeting in Basel I also had the chance to open a dialogue with the Turkmen authorities and to follow up on issues raised in our Baku Declaration. I hope this dialogue will continue and strengthen soon.

As Chair of this committee, I have been calling on the authorities in Azerbaijan to pave the way for a platform for talks that would allow us contact with some human rights defenders and journalists currently in prison. I have received very little response, but I hope that this situation will change very soon and end a period of reversals in terms of fundamental rights.

I also want to go to Georgia soon, along with the Special Representative for the Caucasus, and I hope that Belarus will take advantage of the upcoming election cycle to start a process of strengthening the rule of law and its commitments to democratic values. As chair of this committee, I remain open to cooperation, in action that will always be conducted in consultation with relevant Assembly leaders.

In the case of Russia, we have seen some worrying developments, particularly in terms of smothering the role of civil society and NGOs. I call on the Russian authorities to lift such administrative constraints. A strong and proactive civil society is the sign of a strong and democratic country.

At last year's meeting I stated my intention to promote a visit to Guantanamo. This visit took place recently, together with our Vice-Chair Mr. Kulkuloglu, and today we are proceeding to publish a report, which I encourage you all to look at.

Guantanamo is still a huge mistake, a black mark on our collective history which, in recent years, has only served the purposes of propaganda by radical movements and authoritarian states. Authoritarian states point to Guantanamo as a symbol to deflect legitimate criticism of their own countries. Radical movements, because they raise Guantanamo as a banner to appeal to hate, which they exploit to nourish their recruitment ambitions.

There is one and only one solution for this mistake - the conclusive closure of this prison.

However, thirteen years after it opened and after two Presidents have agreed that it should be closed, problems and shifting positions persist in stopping this process.

After all this time there are still 122 detainees there, against many of whom there is not even any evidence to support a charge leading to a trial.

Among them at present there are 54 men who could be set free after transfer and a further 58 awaiting the periodic review of their cases, after which at least some of them might join the group for transfer.

In the absence of conditions to return them to their countries of origin, I call for the active engagement of all members of this committee to arrange conditions in their countries with a view to accommodating detainees.

The United States cannot be left to solve this problem by itself and I am sure that, in addition to the 14 OSCE states that have already accepted ex-detainees, it will be possible to count on the cooperation of more countries.

Of course we also appeal to the various players in America's domestic politics to play a more constructive role, because the solution to this problem depends to a very great extent on them.

In our report, we also encourage a discussion regarding whether the traditional laws of war, applied by the United States in keeping people in Guantanamo, are appropriate in the modern fight against terrorism.

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I know some of you have made serious criticisms regarding the model of these sessions, with the participation of guests followed by a discussion. Although sensitive to these criticisms, I have

decided to keep this model and also to argue for its extension by broadening what this committee can address.

Colleagues,

The emergence of new conflicts and the worsening of others have generated a humanitarian tragedy whose repercussions are hard to assess.

In 2013, we broke through the barrier of 50 million refugees, last registered during the Second World War.

In the OSCE area it is estimated that the Ukrainian conflict, with over five thousand fatalities, has generated over one million six hundred thousand displaced persons. One million have sought refuge abroad and six hundred thousand have sought shelter in other regions of Ukraine.

The Syrian conflict, on our border, has so far displaced more than 10 million people, of whom 3.5 million sought refuge in neighboring countries, with Turkey recorded as having 1.7 million refugees, but it is widely believed that the real figure may be close to 2 million.

Added to these movements, we further have all those that are being generated among us today, as a consequence of the conflicts in the Balkans and the Caucasus and arising from ethnic persecution.

Yes, there are millions! Fleeing from poverty, persecution and destruction in an attempt to save their and their families' lives.

And us? Can we continue in good conscience by simply saying that the neighboring countries are doing their job and the international community is helping by offering support?

Can we leave Turkey, Italy, Greece, Spain and others on their own?

Can we keep denying these people the hope of a return to normal life?

Perhaps it is possible, but at the end will we still be us? Will we still be true to our principles? What would our parents and grandparents say to us? After all, many of them belonged to a generation of refugees.

I know that my thinking is far from being consensual among us. In the face of increasingly strict measures against migration, all too often generated by the reaction to the perception of danger, I feel like the ant struggling on the path that is coming from the opposite direction, mentioned in a revolutionary song in my country.

But we need some ants to be going along the path in the opposite direction so that change can happen.

I speak to you today with the dismay felt by someone in Sanliurfa, Turkey, on the border of Syria who I spoke to a few weeks ago. He asked about how that little town can do more to receive and care for more refugees than the entire European Union is ready to do until 2016.

I could talk here for hours about the visit of the OSCE PA to Turkey, about what is happening in Ukraine, about so much, so much, but I prefer to spend our time on those who are suffering and dealing directly with this problem every day. It is for that reason that I have invited Mr. Dzemiliev and Dr. Fandi, who have themselves been displaced and exiled from their homes, so that we can all

hear them in the first person.

I look forward to our discussions.