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and Humanitarian Questions*

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and Humanitarian Questions*
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Dear colleagues,

Distinguished guests,

When we met here one year ago, with the OSCE's 40th anniversary in front of us, we were looking at how far the organization has come. Regrettably, however, 2015 was a year for little optimism regarding human rights. It highlighted just how far we have to go to ensure peace and respect for human rights for everyone in the region.

Changes have been slow to develop. As I approach the end of my third term as Chair of this Committee, I have an increasingly frustrated feeling of constantly repeating the same things, while seeing little actual progress.

Our Helsinki Declaration from July provides an assessment of the challenges and problems our region is facing. It also provides concrete recommendations on how to improve the situation. While I am disappointed that the 2015 OSCE Ministerial Council failed to reach agreement on any documents related to human rights, I am proud our Assembly has the courage to address these difficult issues.

The reality is that hardly a day goes by without news of conflict, suppression of the media, unlawful detentions, repression of civil society, abuses to the

rule of law, discrimination against minorities, rejection of foreigners and violations of people's human rights.

As you may know, I and my colleagues have been actively engaged in the field of migrants and refugees in the past year. However, I would prefer to hold my comments on this work until our debate later in this meeting. I would therefore now like to share with you just some of the other work I have been doing as Chair of this Committee.

As many of you will have seen from my public statements, pressure on civil society in our region has continued to increase. People are being put in prison and harassed simply for trying to make a difference. Laws are passed simply to block effective work by non-governmental organizations.

Whenever possible, I have conveyed my concerns and suggestions in private. I have appreciated the dialogue I have had with several countries on these issues. But at times, it is important to speak out.

I want to reiterate my concern with legislation in some countries, and draft legislation in other countries, in which NGOs that receive funding from abroad must register as "foreign agents." These and other restrictions are simply poorly disguised tools intended to stop independent work. I hope that Russia will consider repealing its foreign agent law and recognize NGOs as one of the best parts of a democratic society. Whether they work in the field of environmental advocacy, gay rights or election-monitoring, we all benefit when civil society speaks.

I have welcomed individual releases of political prisoners such as Leyla Yunus in Azerbaijan, but we must continue working together, and I'm waiting for more positive signals after the recent visit of a PA delegation to Azerbaijan.

As Chair of this Committee, I have also been active in advocating for the closure of the Guantanamo detention facility. Last year I spoke about my visit to Guantanamo and in my report made clear the legal problems regarding this continued detention. Today there remain 91 prisoners in the facility.

I very much welcome the plan released two days ago to close this facility by President Obama's government, and hope that action will soon be taken to

implement this. I call on the United States Congress to now do its work so that Guantanamo can be shut. I will not get tired of repeating this: close this prison.

Colleagues,

A free media is a pillar of democratic society and this year has witnessed a furthering erosion of the freedom of the press in our region. Many of you will have seen my publicly expressed concerns regarding the treatment of journalists and legal measures in several countries. This has included countries both within the EU and outside.

I could go on but I do not want to use up valuable time for discussion. I am sure you all share my concerns on the state of human rights in our region and I hope our work here today will contribute to improving the situation.

I would like to thank our senior OSCE representatives for participating in this meeting. The ability in this Winter Meeting for the parliamentary and governmental sides to work together is an important opportunity for us all. Your contributions are valued and will undoubtedly improve the quality of our discussion.

Thank you.