

Special Debate on World Crisis on Freedom of Expression and Respect for Religious Beliefs



On February 24 during its Winter Meeting, the OSCE PA held an open international debate on the world crisis over freedom of expression and respect for religious beliefs. This extraordinary debate was held to further political dialogue

on the crisis - a critical step in finding common ground to overcome the difficulties. Opening the debate, PA President Alcee L. Hastings reiterated his calls for freedom of the press to be exercised in a dignified and responsible manner. The special debate continued with introductory remarks by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti.

During the debate parliamentarians from many delegations across the OSCE, as well as from Mediterranean partner States, took the floor to exchange views. Delegates roundly condemned the unjustifiable violent reactions to the publication of cartoons, and many Members called for exercising freedom of expression with a sense of responsibility. Other issues, such as the role of the press in democratic societies, the principle of secularism, blasphemy laws, the importance of education in tolerance, inter-religious dialogue and the need to fight all kinds of extremisms, were also discussed during the debate.

General Committees discuss future work during Winter Meeting

Under the Chairmanship of Goran Lennmarker, the First General Committee heard a report from the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Ambassador Rolf Ekeus, who briefed the Committee on his coming study of 'new minorities,' based upon OSCE PA recommendations to address this issue. Ambassador Werner Wnendt, Head of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, also briefed the First Committee on the situation in that region and stressed the role that the OSCE is playing and the important contribution that parliamentarians can make in promoting dialogue throughout the region of the Balkans. Wolfgang Grossruck, the Rapporteur of the Committee presented his intentions to analyse the situation in the Balkan region with particular emphasis on OSCE Field Missions in his report and resolution for the upcoming Annual Session in Brussels.

Congressman Benjamin Cardin Chaired the Second General Committee's meeting, and encouraged the OSCE to enhance the role of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities so that he can initiate activities to strengthen economic and environmental initiatives, and learn from best practices from other states. The OSCE Co-ordinator, Mr. Bernard Snoy, briefed Members on his office's efforts on combating corruption and promoting entrepreneurship among women-owned and minority-owned small businesses. Roland Blum, Rapporteur of the Committee, gave a presentation on the subjects to be considered in his report. The Committee was also addressed by Stuart Gilman, the Head of the Anticorruption Unit of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, and Syméon Antoulas, Diplomatic Advisor to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The acting Chair of the Third Committee, Cecilia Wigström, opened discussion in this Committee by stressing the importance of free elections which reflect the will of the population. OSCE/ODIHR Director Christian Strohal outlined the ODIHR's activities in the field of election observation, and welcomed OSCE PA input in this field, including through resolutions and debates. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, also gave input on his activities related to elections and discussed what constitutes a favourable media environment for elections. Committee Rapporteur Anne-Marie Lizin gave Members an overview of the primary issues she plans to address during the Annual Session, including election observation, parliamentary oversight of security structures and crimes of honour.

