



Press release (print version)

Head of OSCE human rights office expresses concern about outcome of Swiss minaret ban referendum

ATHENS, 30 November 2009 –,The director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Ambassador Janez Lenarcic, expressed concern today at the outcome of the referendum held in Switzerland on Sunday on the ban of the construction of minarets.

"A blanket prohibition of minarets is not consistent with OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief and the principle of non-discrimination based on religion," Lenarcic said in Athens, where he will participate in the OSCE Ministerial Council, to be held tomorrow and Wednesday.

The referendum, launched by the Swiss People's Party and the Federal Democratic Union, was backed by 57.5 per cent of voters and a majority of cantons.

Members of the Advisory Council of ODIHR's Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief also expressed concern.

"The claim that the approved constitutional amendment does not limit freedom of religion or belief because it only affects the construction of minarets rather than mosques, and that minarets have no religious significance, is seriously flawed," said Jakob Finci, President of Jewish Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina and a member of the ODIHR Advisory Council.

Gerhard Robbers, another member of the Council and Professor of Law at Trier University in Germany said religious buildings must conform to planning laws, like all buildings.

"However, such laws must be non-discriminatory and it is difficult to see how banning the construction of minarets is compatible with this," he said. "According to international norms on freedom of religion or belief, the contents of a religion and its manifestation, including the question of minarets, should be defined by the worshippers themselves and not by states."

Lenarcic added:

"By singling out a specific community, the outcome of this referendum has the potential to create tensions and generate a climate of intolerance against Muslims. OSCE commitments call for fostering mutual understanding and respect between believers of different communities."

The Advisory Council is a consultative body of OSCE/ODIHR with acknowledged expertise on freedom of religion or belief, consisting of members from many OSCE participating States and from diverse backgrounds. The Advisory Council advises ODIHR and participating States on pertinent issues and provides legislative reviews and expert opinions.

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