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BRUSSELS, 8 February 2006 - Expressing concern at the growing violent protests over the religious cartoons appearing in several newspapers, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, today urged all sides to respect the basic freedoms of expression and media, while reminding the press of its responsibility towards society. The Chairman-in-Office recognized the difficult balancing act that is necessary to reconcile freedom of expression and respect for religious and other beliefs. The Chairman-in-Office fully supported freedom of expression as a fundamental cornerstone of democratic societies, but at the same time he felt that a responsible media could have a supportive role in the promotion of dialogue, mutual respect and understanding: "The press should decide in a responsible way what it publishes. Although States might not want to subscribe to the content of media releases, it is not up to governments to influence the content of the press." The Chairman underlined his respect for the religious beliefs and tenets of all religions and regretted that the religious feelings of people had been hurt by cartoons appearing in several newspapers recently. "The nature of the content of these cartoons, however, cannot and does not legitimize violence." Therefore, the Chairman-in-Office urged the OSCE community to focus on future positive steps. "We will work with the three Personal Representatives on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination to develop a joint approach in promoting mutual respect and dialogue". The Chairman also pointed to the OSCE human dimension meeting planned to be held in Kazakhstan in June 2006, focusing on inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding. "This meeting will offer an important venue to promote and facilitate intercultural and inter-faith dialogue and partnerships, at both the national and the international levels." The Chairman-in-Office recalled the decision of the OSCE Ministerial Council of Ljubljana to support to the "Alliance of Civilizations" initiative of the Secretary General of the United Nations. The OSCE is committed to contribute to this initiative. "Promotion of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and the advancement of mutual understanding and respect is a challenge of the global world. Drawing on the expertise of the OSCE structures and institutions, we can contribute to dialogue and co-operation between cultures and religions beyond the OSCE area. The OSCE as a dialogue-based organization should seize this opportunity to make a difference in this important global discussion." The Chairman-in-Office announced that the development of these steps will make full use of the framework of cooperation and dialogue with the Mediterranean and Asian partner countries. Further steps to enhance mutual understanding and dialogue will also be explored in consultation with participating States, institutions, personal representatives, and the Mediterranean and Asian partner countries.

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