



4TH SESSION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
HIGH-LEVEL SEGMENT

Statement by H.E. Mr. Vartan OSKANIAN,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia
Geneva, March 13, 2007

Mr. President of the Council,
Madame High Commissioner,

In this first year of this new Council, together with the human rights community, we have been refining the processes that will empower this body in order for it to meet our shared high expectations. The expectations of this Council were high at the outset. They would have remained high, even if the world were not embroiled in destructive explosive conflicts. It is no surprise that at the heart of most of those conflicts, lies an absence of a respect for basic human rights.

Our collective responsibility is to those individuals and groups, those millions represented through their governments here, as well as to those whose voices remain muted. They are not interested in our debates, they know little about the nuance and the detail, but our seriousness and sincerity will be judged either by their trust and confidence or by their cynicism and disdain.

With this realization, the strengths of the Commission on Human Rights drove the need for an even more powerful body. The limitations of that Commission compelled the creation of a more effective structure with broader reach. The Universal Periodic Review process, if it lives up to its name, holds the promise of the impartiality and inclusiveness we seek and require, in order for the process to transform itself from a means to an end – from a way of investigating the human rights environment to enabling an environment where there are human rights.

Our objective is a world where the rights of individuals and groups are respected, where each neighbourhood and each community, each city and country, each region and continent, are safe havens for all who live or travel there. Religion *does* tear people apart, as do economic disparities, language and ideology. But the frustrating and fascinating contradiction is that faith has also *bound* people together, prosperity *has* been a common goal, language and ideology *have* been shared.

Mr. President,

This universal truism is also true in our region. Unfortunately, the human rights record in our whole region during the past fifteen years is nothing to be envied; it is a case study in how human rights abuses lead to conflict and how conflicts heighten human rights abuses. From pogroms to ethnic cleansing, from destruction of spiritual markers to vilification of ethnic groups, we have lived through the worst that man can do to man. It is no wonder that the region has been mired in conflict since the first days of independence. As we search for ways to build a peace atop this pain and destruction, however, it is clear that solutions can only be

found through the genuine and universal acceptance and application of basic, fundamental individual and collective human rights. There is the formula for peace: The violation of human rights brought us to this quagmire; the respect for human rights will get us out.

Indeed it is an entangled web of human rights abuses of varied scope, nature and depth that has brought our region to this situation. First, there is the total disrespect of the cultural values of other people. When a government intentionally plans and executes the destruction of centuries-old monuments of profound cultural, artistic and religious significance, that government has violated the spirits of the dead and the trust of the living. Five thousand Armenian monuments have been destroyed by the Azerbaijani government in the region of Nakhichevan in the past few years, simply to eliminate the trace of a whole nation from that territory.

Second, there is the violation of the right of people to self-determination. In the waning days of the USSR, the people of Nagorno-Karabakh opted for self-determination. The Azerbaijani authorities decided to attack their own citizens to suppress those calls. And by doing so, they lost the political and moral right to govern people they considered their own citizens.

Third, there are the negative consequences of the double denialism of the Turkish government. The denial of the right of their own people to freely discuss and debate their common past with Armenians, and the denial to both Armenians and Turks to forge a common future, by keeping borders closed. Hrant Dink, the Turkish-Armenian journalist who fell victim to an assassin's bullet, was the embodiment of both Turkishness and Armenianness. Hrant Dink had two missions in his life – to break all taboos within his own society, Turkish society, and to forge a dialog between Turks and Armenians to reach understanding and reconciliation.

Indeed, that's exactly what we want today. There needs to be an open society within Turkey so that their people can, without the fear of persecution, freely debate the past, and there has to be an open border between us so that our two peoples can interact and engage. Only in this way can we transcend our differences and reconcile.

Now, Mr. President, a word about our own commitment to human rights and democracy. In this, our 16th year of independence, our people will be going to the polls to elect a parliament whose powers the people chose to enhance, to invest them with broad authorities for social and economic advances. The task of our next government is clear: to stay the course and more aggressively promote human rights, alleviate poverty and build effective governing institutions, to enable our society to embrace democracy individually and collectively.

But the cruelties inherent in the process of massive economic readjustment that we have been undergoing have led to a sense of powerlessness on the part of ordinary citizens. As a consequence, they are cynical about the value of expressing their voice. This means we must work harder to strengthen democratic institutions and processes, including elections, because they are not just ends. They are also means to creating the necessary political and economic environment which lead to distributed growth and dignified development.

Finally, Mr. President, this Council and each of us, its members, have a responsibility to promote the human rights we hold so dear in the world, in our regions and in our own societies. There is nothing new in this formula. Our challenge is to commit to it and make it work.

Thank you.