



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### **Reply to Ambassador Badescu Head of Center, Ashgabat**

As delivered by Deputy Permanent Representative Douglas Davidson  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
March 25, 2004

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We too would like to warmly welcome the head of the OSCE office in Ashgabat to the Permanent Council today and thank her for her thorough report. We are, as ever, impressed by Ambassador Badescu's dedication and by her efforts to do as much as possible in what clearly is a difficult operating environment.

We are pleased that the Turkmen authorities have recently taken some positive steps forward, such as the March 11 decrees on "the improvement of the order of the exit of citizens from Turkmenistan" and on the "guarantees of the citizens' freedom to religion." Of course, these decrees will mean nothing unless they are fully implemented.

We are concerned by reports that despite the January lifting of the exit visa regime, and despite the March 11 presidential decree, significant groups of people are still effectively prohibited from moving about freely in Turkmenistan as well as from leaving the country. This group includes, but is not limited to, journalists, members of NGO and members of families of dissidents, prisoners, or former government officials, and those active in unregistered religious communities.

On the religious freedom decree, we thank the Turkmen delegation for the information it provided last week regarding the number of Orthodox Christian and Sunni Muslim religious groups already registered in Turkmenistan.

We are more interested, however, in the registration of groups not belonging to the two official religions. We therefore ask if our Turkmen colleagues could provide us with information on the registration of minority religious groups following the March 11 decree.

Mr. Chairman, the United States harbors grave concerns about the overall human rights situation in Turkmenistan. We note with great regret that, despite the considerable efforts of the Center in Ashgabat, bilateral embassies, President Ahtisaari and other distinguished international figures, the Turkmen authorities have denied the ICRC access to detainees and prisoners.

We are acutely concerned about the well being of the many Turkmen citizens being held incommunicado, particularly those who were arrested in connection with the attack on November 25, 2002. We once again call on the Turkmen authorities to grant immediate and unfettered access to these prisoners.

We fully support the Center's priorities, and we encourage Ambassador Badescu and her dedicated team to continue their work with the Turkmen authorities to win approval for meaningful projects. We applaud the work done so far on border security, Small Arms and Light Weapons, on the development of Small and Medium Enterprises, on promoting human rights and civil society and on providing education and training to youth and women; and we encourage the center to try to build on these activities.

In closing Mr. Chairman, please allow me once again to thank Ambassador Badescu and her colleagues, both Turkman and international, in the Center for their persistence and their dedication. We wish them well in the months to come. I thank you.