



## The United States Mission to the OSCE

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

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
October 23, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to extend a very warm welcome to Ambassador Badescu and to say that Ambassador, we appreciate all the hard work that you and your team are undertaking in a very challenging environment.

Having recently visited Turkmenistan, and I would join Ambassador Badescu in once again urging my colleagues here to visit the OSCE center in Ashgabat and other OSCE presences where ever possible, but having made that visit, I say with regret that I wish there were more positive things to note. While there are some encouraging signs, there are not nearly enough.

It is good to see that Turkmenistan is engaging with the UN and the OSCE, and we note with satisfaction the forum on conflict prevention and sustainable development in Central Asia, which was held just last week in Ashgabat. Events like these are important, and we encourage any efforts to promote regional dialogue and cooperation. But dialogue and cooperation are not enough on which to base a solid, sustainable society. For this, there have to be fundamental democratic and economic reforms, and respect for political, civil and human rights, and it is here where Turkmenistan lags behind noticeably and highly regrettably.

During my recent visit to Turkmenistan, I learned that virtually all mechanisms of pluralism and peaceful dissent have been eliminated. As suggested by Ambassador Badescu's report, the Government of Turkmenistan does not even recognize the existence of the rule of law, of democratization and of human rights problems. For example, NGOs are not being allowed to register. Even religious groups that meet the highly restrictive national requirements for registration are nonetheless prohibited from establishing themselves, and all other religious groups are severely repressed, harassed, their members sometimes even tortured. In addition, students continue to encounter difficulties in participating in educational exchanges.

Moreover, as I myself was denied permission to visit a prison, or to meet with the wife of a prisoner, in spite of numerous requests before and during my visit, thus I was forced to conclude that the Turkmen authorities were concerned about what I would see or hear. Perhaps the Government of Turkmenistan will extend to President Ahtisaari and to High Commissioner for National Minorities Rolf Ekeus the prison access that the United States was denied. I urge the Turkmen authorities to do this, as only a visit by an impartial observer will dispel the disturbing rumors of deaths in detention, torture of prisoners, and overall appalling prison conditions.

Given my own experience in Turkmenistan, I don't know how much more convincing the Turkmen Government requires before it responds to the fact that it has urgent problems that must be addressed.

The OSCE Center in Ashgabat continues to do what it can to create an understanding of, and a climate for, political, economic and social transformation in Turkmenistan. It seems, however, that Ambassador Badescu and her staff are having to work too hard to get the Turkmen authorities to accept what the OSCE is willing to give, and to do so for free.

It is a shame that the Government of Turkmenistan did not issue exit visas so journalists could attend the OSCE's Regional Media Conference in Bishkek and that as noted by the EU Turkmenistan's chair at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting was empty. From what I saw of the media reports of my visit to Turkmenistan, Turkmen media outlets could use some help in learning how to report what really happened rather than what the imagination conjures up. The news media must report, not fictionalize. The exit visa regime itself is abhorrent; we and others have long urged the Government of Turkmenistan to reverse its decision to impose exit visas. Raising artificial borders by restricting mobility runs counter to the regional cooperation efforts that Turkmen authorities have undertaken.

We are likewise deeply concerned about the strict governmental control of all aspects of everyday life, including the infringement of basic freedoms and rights, such as the right to travel, the right to worship, and the freedom to associate and assemble.

The United States shares the opinion of much of the world community that Turkmenistan's transformation to a more democratic society is still a long and challenging task, and we pledge our support to helping with this process.

In closing, Mr. Chairman I would just like to say how much I admire the Center for its dogged persistence in developing and proposing new projects. I encourage Turkmen officials to work with the Center and to implement these projects and many, many more, as quickly and as effectively as possible. Thank you