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ORAL STATEMENT*

to the

**OSCE CONFERENCE ON
RACISM, XENOPHOBIA, AND DISCRIMINATION**

Vienna, 4-5 September 2003

**Session 4: Information and Awareness-Raising: The Role of the Media
in Conveying and Countering Prejudice**

I am co-chair of the European Region of the International Lesbian and Gay Association, a federation of around 150 national and local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organisations from all over Europe.

A pre-requisite for the media to become a genuine ally in the fight against discrimination, racism and xenophobia is freedom and independence of journalists. Some OSCE member states still seem to have problems accepting critical journalists. I want to use this opportunity to denounce an extremely severe and appalling case – the case of Ruslan Sharipov, a dissident journalist and human rights activist in Uzbekistan, who, on 13 August 2003, was sentenced, in a totally unfair trial, to a five and a half year prison term, under most likely fabricated accusations of homosexual acts and sexual contacts with minors. While he had earlier declared his innocence, he, in the end, admitted guilt – obviously after officials had threatened to hurt his mother. Only a couple of days ago, on 28 August, Sharipov's public defender, Surat Ikramov, was severely beaten by four masked men in Tashkent.

Uzbekistan is, besides Turkmenistan, the only OSCE member state where homosexuality is still illegal. This is a shame, and a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We urge the Uzbek authorities to conduct a prompt and impartial investigation into these allegations that Sharipov was forced to confess to the charges, and to allow a fair appeal trial that meets international standards.

We also urge Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to repeal the total ban on homosexuality in their criminal codes.

Let me also give an example where the media proved to be a real ally in the defence of lesbians and gays – against reactionary and discriminatory forces. At the end of July, the Vatican released a document calling upon Catholic politicians around the world to oppose pro-actively any legislation that would give legal rights to same-sex couples. The document qualifies homosexual behaviour as “immoral”. In the official German translation, the upbringing of children by lesbian and gay couples is equated with “rape”. Such language and action by the Vatican is unacceptable. It was good to see that the document received strong criticism and was almost unanimously rejected by the media. And yesterday, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling upon all EU member states to introduce same-sex marriage.

However, one important question remains for us: In view of these attacks by a Vatican institution, which – by the way – is the direct successor to the Holy Inquisition, we must seriously question the role the Vatican is allowed to play in international organisations such as the OSCE or the UN. We strongly doubt that the Vatican, with such attitudes, can really make any credible and convincing contribution to the international human rights and anti-discrimination discourse.

I had prepared a more detailed statement for yesterday’s session 2 but was too far down on the speakers’ list to be given the floor. So I have asked the Secretariat that it be distributed to all delegations; copies are also available on the NGO table outside.

Thank you, Mr Moderator.