

STATEMENT BY THE MINSK GROUP CO-CHAIRS
TO THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL

Vienna, November, 2008

[Ambassador Yuri Merzlyakov of the Russian Federation]

Mr. Chairman,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the course of the last year that has passed since our previous Statement to the OSCE Permanent Council, important events happened in the region of the South Caucasus as a whole and in Armenia and Azerbaijan, in particular. These events had their impact on the process of settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well as on the mediation activity of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs. We have been regularly, usually once every three months, informing members of the Minsk Group about the state of the settlement process as well as the course and plans of our joint work. From their part we have received constant encouraging support and valuable advice, for which we express to our Minsk Group colleagues our sincere gratitude.

Looking at our activity during the past year in chronological order, the first important event to mention was the presentation by the Foreign Ministers of Russia, France and the US Under-Secretary of State to the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan just before the opening of the Ministerial Conference in Madrid of the written document with proposals of the three Co-Chair countries on the basic principles for the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

These official proposals of the Co-Chairs are commonly referred to now as the “Madrid document”. The Co-Chairs explained from the beginning that this document was not an ultimatum, and its provisions were not the “ten Commandments.” Rather, the document was a formulation of basic principles, some preliminary agreed or based on at least some mutual understanding, and some consisting of proposals from the Co-Chairs on those points on which the sides had the most serious differences.

Today, almost a year after the presentation of the Madrid document to the Parties, the Co-Chairs are convinced that this move allowed for the transformation of a set of working talking points into an official proposal of Moscow, Paris and Washington, recapping all the elements of a balanced compromise. This document is kept by the OSCE Secretary General. We believe the formal presentation of this proposal was absolutely necessary. It secured the basis for future negotiations, which had been worked out during the last three and a half years and, in 2008, especially between the presidential elections in Armenia in February and in Azerbaijan in October, has undergone a serious test.

[Ambassador Bernard Fassier of France]

Mr. Chairman,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this new opportunity given to my fellow Co-Chairs and me to brief again the OSCE Permanent Council at this important juncture for the negotiation process.

On January 14-18, our “troika” made a shuttle trip to the region, visiting twice Yerevan and Baku. Despite the fact that both Presidents estimated that they have not been before so closed to the possibility of a compromise, we received comments from the Parties to the Madrid document, and these comments demonstrated the first attempts to revise substantively the balanced package of basic principals for the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement.

These attempts culminated in March with the presentation by Azerbaijan of the draft UN General Assembly resolution which selectively propagated only certain of these principles, to the exclusion of others, without considering the Co-Chairs’ proposal in its balanced entirety. Because of this selective approach, the three Co-Chair countries opposed this unilateral draft resolution and voted against it, remaining united to oppose this attempt to impose a unilateral solution exactly as they refused almost one year before the so-called “constitutional referendum in NK”.

In parallel, we had to deal with a severe deterioration of the situation along the Line of Contact, where serious clashes with loss of life occurred in early March.

After several meetings with the sides, in March and April, including with President Aliev and newly elected President Sargsian in Bucharest, the Co-Chairs managed to organize the first meeting in Strasbourg last May between the Foreign Ministers after the nomination of the new head of Armenian diplomacy, Mr. E.Nalbandian.

This meeting paved the way for the resumption after a year-long pause in conducting bilateral summits with the first meeting in Saint-Petersburg between President Aliev and President Sargsian on June 6, 2008, which both the Presidents assessed as constructive.

As a follow up to this summit the Co-Chairs revisited the region at the end of June to receive the confirmation by both Presidents of their readiness to continue to work with the help of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs on their proposals on the basic principles presented in Madrid. This reconfirmed our last year's expectations, which we shared with the Permanent Council, that the electoral year 2008 would not be idle, but rather a year of intensive work on finalizing the basic principles for the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement and that the talks should not begin again from scratch after the elections.

[Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza of the United States]

Mr. Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this opportunity to again brief the Permanent Council. I'm pleased to be here with my French and Russian colleagues.

In September, Ambassador Fassier and I traveled to the region to consult with the Presidents and Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, both in a bilateral capacity and on behalf of the Co-Chairmanship. In Yerevan, Baku, and in Nagorno-Karabakh, we heard a consistent message from our interlocutors: a window of opportunity was again emerging that could allow us to make significant progress on reaching an agreement on the Basic Principles. All our interlocutors agreed that the tragic events in Georgia in August served as a potent reminder of the human costs of war, and demonstrated how easily instability can spread throughout the entire region. Other regional developments, including talks between Turkey and Armenia, helped reinforce the idea that the normalization of relations within the region was within reach and, once achieved, could serve as a foundation for long-term stability, security, and prosperity in the South Caucasus.

At the end of September, the Co-Chairs met in New York on the margins of the UN General Assembly session. We met with the President of Armenia, Serge Sargsian, as well as with the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Edward Nalbandian and Elmar Mammadyarov. During these meetings in New York, we discussed the possibilities for organizing a summit between the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan

shortly after the Azerbaijani presidential elections. That summit, hosted by Russian President Medvedev, took place on November 2 at the Maiendorf castle outside of Moscow, with all three of the Co-Chairs present. Significantly, the three presidents signed a written declaration, the first ever document signed by the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The declaration commits the Presidents to seek a political resolution of the conflict on the basis of the principles and norms of international law and international documents. The Presidents also reaffirmed the importance of the mediation efforts of the three Co-Chairs and make note of the meeting of the Co-Chair representatives with the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Madrid on the margins of last year's OSCE Ministerial Council meeting.

In the declaration, the Presidents stress the importance of confidence-building measures and international guarantees to build the trust required to reach and sustain a just and balanced agreement.

Finally, in their declaration, the Presidents call on their Foreign Ministers to energize their efforts to finalize a framework for a political settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on the basis of the Minsk Group's ongoing efforts, including the Basic Principles we have been discussing and developing for the past three and a half years, and for actively pursuing confidence building measures between the sides.

Mr. Chairman,

We interpret this declaration as closing the door on the disputes over the validity of the Madrid proposals, and as a vindication of our efforts to mediate a resolution to the conflict on the basis of the Basic Principles. We will visit the region in the weeks prior to the Ministerial Council meeting in Helsinki to work with the parties to refine the Basic Principles

and find a mutually acceptable solution to the last remaining differences between the sides. We hope we can help the parties agree on a date when the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia can meet again to build on the positive momentum that has been established.