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Address by

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President of Turkey

**on the occasion of the
fourth part of the 2007 Ordinary Session
of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly**

(Strasbourg, 1-5 October 2007)

Mr President,
Distinguished Parliamentarians,
Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with strong personal feelings that I address you today, as the President of the Republic of Turkey. I was an active member of the Assembly for nine years. The last time I spoke from this rostrum was nearly five years ago, as the Prime Minister of a newly elected government. During the last four years I represented my country at the Committee of Ministers as the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

I gained great experience and had valuable inspiration from my long association with the Council of Europe. Therefore, coming back to this Assembly today is not merely a pleasant occasion to meet many old friends. It is also a deeply emotional moment.

I warmly thank my old friend, President Rene Van der Linden for inviting me to the Assembly again. I pay tribute to you, Mr. President, for all you have done to raise the profile and visibility of this Assembly during your tenure. Under your able leadership, the Assembly's role as a pan-European forum for debate and discussion has been strengthened. The debates you organized on current issues like inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, state of human rights and democracy in Europe testify to the contribution of this Assembly to the European debate.

Mr. President,

When I had addressed the Assembly in January 2003, I had outlined the ambitious reform agenda adopted by the Turkish Government and supported by the Turkish Parliament elected in the November 2002 elections. It was an agenda which embodied Turkey's strong commitments to achieve the highest standards of democracy, rule of law and human rights. Today, I am proud to say that Turkey has lived up to the expectations it generated by fulfilling the commitments undertaken.

First and foremost among them has been the human rights policy. One pillar of this policy has been assuming new obligations by becoming party to core international instruments on fundamental rights and freedoms. I am pleased to inform you that Turkey is now party to all of the seven principal international human rights treaties of the UN. Turkey is also party to a large number of Council of Europe conventions and protocols, including Protocols No. 6 and 13, abolishing the death penalty in all circumstances.

The second pillar of Turkey's policy has been legislative reform. In this field our progress has been significant. Existing laws and regulations have been revised in the light of our international and European commitments. The case-law of the European Court of Human Rights and the recommendations of the international monitoring mechanisms have been taken on board. Nine legislative packages and substantial constitutional amendments have been passed by our Parliament. Amendments on the Political Parties Law and the Anti-Terror Law, the adoption of the new Civil and Penal Codes and the new Law on Associations are among the benchmarks of our legislative reforms.

In this context, gender equality is enshrined as a constitutional principle with an emphasis on the obligation of the state to ensure such equality. All forms of discrimination are banned. Legal and constitutional guarantees on the right to association and assembly are reinforced. Limits that can be imposed on freedom of expression are reduced in line with the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. Cultural and religious rights have been upgraded.

Fight against torture and ill-treatment has been another priority. The "zero tolerance" policy against torture yielded impressive results. We have put in place an effective legislative and regulatory framework for combating torture. In the words of the former President of the

European Committee for Prevention of Torture, today "it is difficult to find a Council of Europe member state with a more advanced set of provisions in combating torture" than Turkey.

Human rights reforms in Turkey have been widely acclaimed by the international community from Europe to the Middle East.

I should also point to the fact that the reforms in Turkey did not take place at a most favourable international environment. It was at a time when a massive war in Iraq, threats of war and other conflicts in our neighbourhood were going on. The world economy was also passing through dire straits.

Mr. President,

The ongoing transformation in Turkey corresponds to the aspirations of the Turkish people. The cumulative impact of the democratic reforms is that Turkey today is more pluralistic, inclusive and tolerant. The orderly conduct of parliamentary elections with a turn out of almost eighty five percent in this summer reaffirms the commitment of the Turkish people to democratic values.

The process is still underway. In a big country with a large population, sweeping reforms are difficult to uniformly implement overnight. The third pillar of our human rights policy, that is effective implementation, still poses few challenges. The new Turkish Government has announced that it will give top priority to addressing these challenges. The Government has also announced its full commitment to ensure full exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms by every individual.

The political reforms in Turkey were accompanied by sweeping economic reforms, financial discipline and structural changes in economy. Thus, economic growth and dynamism was substantially boosted. Reforms have also led to the flourishing of cultural, literary and artistic life in Turkey. Istanbul's designation as the cultural capital of Europe for 2010 and Turkey's designation as the focus country of international Frankfurt Book Fair in 2008 are some of its indications.

Mr. President,
Distinguished members,

Turkey's commitment to the reform process will go on. I trust that the newly elected Turkish Parliament, which has started its legislative work only two days ago, will address these issues soon. In my inaugural speech of the new session of the Turkish Grand National Assembly I put a strong emphasis on the need for the continuation and deepening of the reform process and its full implementation. I am confident that the level of maturity achieved by the Turkish democracy will enable us to tackle remaining human rights issues effectively.

Mr. President,

Now, a very lively and wide debate has been taking place in Turkey on the elaboration of an entirely new constitution or a comprehensive amendment of the current one. This broad public debate is continuing with the participation of all political parties, NGOs, professional associations, universities, think-tanks, intellectuals, media and citizens. I am confident that this debate will culminate in improving Turkey's constitutional norms in line with the requirements of the 21st century.

Mr. President,
Honourable members,

Today, one of the major global challenges is the growing polarization of the international community along cultural and religious fault-lines. Extremists on both sides irresponsibly exploit this all over the world.

I believe that it is time for moderates to be as daring and courageous as extremists.

Troubling events of recent years have made a meaningful dialogue imperative for all of us. A true dialogue among nations calls for respect for and understanding of other cultures and civilizations.

Our basic principles of respect for human rights, democracy and rule of law are universal. Therefore, these principles form a perfect basis for such a true dialogue. For, these values are products of mankind's collective progress and enlightenment.

However, today, racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism and discrimination on religious or ethnic grounds are on the rise in many of our societies.

Migrant communities all over the world, in particular Muslims, are specifically vulnerable to acts of prejudice, hatred and intolerance in the post September 11 period.

Combating discrimination and hatred of all kind requires strong political resolve and pro-active action everywhere. Similarly, we have to reject the identification of terrorism and extremism with any particular religion or culture. The real fault-lines are not among religions or cultures, but among open democracies and authoritarian regimes.

This is why Turkey co-sponsored, together with Spain, the initiative on the Alliance of Civilizations under the auspices of the United Nations, with a view to promoting dialogue and cooperation among different cultures and religions. Turkey, given its historic multicultural experience, its strong links with a vast geography and home to many civilizations, is fully aware that interaction among different cultures is necessary, possible, fruitful and enriching. Turkey's own experience is testimony that secular democracy can flourish in a predominantly Muslim society.

The Council of Europe has been in the forefront of efforts fostering unity in diversity. The Council of Europe's ongoing campaign of "all different – all equal" eloquently reflects this objective.

In this age of globalization ensuring respect for unity in diversity has become a major challenge, simply because globalization renders diversity inevitable.

Mr. President,
Honourable members,

The settlement of anachronic political conflicts in the European geography and in its periphery is a must for the future security, stability and welfare of Europe.

Cyprus remains the oldest unresolved conflict in Europe. The overall settlement of this conflict could have been achieved during the simultaneous referenda which were held on the island on 24 April 2004 on the UN settlement plan. However, that chance was missed due to the rejection of the plan by the Greek Cypriot side.

Had this opportunity been seized then Cyprus now could have been a reunified island and represented as such in this Assembly. Isolations imposed on the Turkish Cypriots would have been lifted. The Turkish and Greek Cypriot property issues would have been resolved. The

military presence of Greece and Turkey would have reached an agreed solution. A negotiated settlement in Cyprus would have transformed the eastern Mediterranean into a hub of regional cooperation between Turkey, Greece and island of Cyprus.

Nevertheless, Turkey remains fully committed to a political settlement: A settlement which will ensure the reunification of the island under the auspices of the good-offices mission of the UN Secretary-General, based on the long established UN parameters.

I recognize the presence of two elected representatives of the Turkish Cypriot people among you.

I seize this opportunity to thank the Parliamentary Assembly for taking this modest but meaningful step in helping to ease the political isolation of the Turkish Cypriots.

Mr. President,

South Caucasus is another critical region burdened with persisting unresolved conflicts. Its frozen conflicts continue to represent a serious threat to the peace and stability in the region. These conflicts provide a major impediment to the region-wide co-operation initiatives. They are also undermining prospects for prosperity of the future generations. Therefore, the solution of these conflicts constitutes one of the most important and urgent issues in the South Caucasus and beyond. Peaceful solutions should also meet the Azerbaijani and Georgian legitimate concerns over their territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Turkey's approach to the South Caucasus is shaped by its genuine desire to establish a comprehensive cooperation in the region. The contribution of all three South Caucasian states would be most preferable.

Turning to South Eastern Europe, the crisis unleashed by the disintegration of former Yugoslavia is back to where it started two decades ago, in Kosovo. Turkey has acted together with the international community in the settlement of Kosovo's final status.

In South Eastern Europe, our focus now must be not on where we were, but on where we would like to head. The issues confronting the region call for bilateral and multilateral cooperation among the Balkan states.

The Black Sea region draws growing attention due to its strategic transportation and trade routes as well as its energy corridors. All Black Sea littoral states are members of the Council of Europe. That provides a common basis for enhanced cooperation. Almost twenty years ago, Turkey has pioneered the establishment of Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation, to help transform the Black Sea into a region of cooperation and integrate it into the global economy. Deeper economic cooperation may also eventually contribute to the resolution of political issues in the region.

I know that your Assembly has been preoccupied with the developments in Iraq. Territorial integrity, political unity and stability of Iraq is of vital importance for the region and beyond.

Turkey contributes in every possible way to further the national reconciliation and political dialogue process in Iraq. Arriving at such political deal will require fair representation of all political elements and equitable sharing of the natural resources of the country.

The current situation in Iraq may not be promising. However, one should not fall into illusion that the current problems can be overcome by the partition of Iraq. This would be the worst scenario for the people of Iraq and the whole region. Therefore, nobody should look for solutions alternative to respecting territorial and political unity of Iraq. This will certainly further complicate the situation.

The situation in Iraq is also of direct relevance for Turkey's security due to the challenge it poses in combating terrorism. The terrorist organization PKK continues to use the north of Iraq as a safe haven and perpetrate violent acts across the boundary.

The need for international cooperation in combating terrorism is today self-evident and compelling. The normative work carried out by the Council of Europe in this field is commendable. It provides the legal basis for enhanced European cooperation.

At this point, I would like to thank you Mr. President for your sincere and prompt reaction to the recent atrocious terrorist attack by PKK against my people in the southeast town of Şirnak. The victims of this attack were dozen local civilians working for an irrigation project. They were going back their home to break their fast last Saturday afternoon.

Mr President,
Distinguished Parliamentarians,

Turkey, as a founding member, believes that the Council of Europe continues to play an essential if not much publicized role in Europe. Its standard setting work has been indispensable in achieving democratic stability in the continent.

The comprehensive system of conventions has created a pan-European legal space with monitoring mechanisms. Independent bodies such as the Office of the Commissioner of Human Rights, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and European Committee for Prevention of Torture carry out very valuable work. The Turkish authorities maintain excellent working relations with them. Our reform process has benefited from their recommendations.

The European Court of Human Rights is a unique institution. The case law it developed over the decades has expanded individual liberties for the citizens of Europe. Turkey supports the adoption of more effective working methods and additional resources to the Court. Entry into force of Protocol 14 without further delay would be a first step in that direction.

There is a large grey area, however, where the protection mechanism provided by the European Convention of Human Rights does not apply. This situation can be corrected by the accession of the European Union to the Convention. Thus, actions directly affecting lives of millions of Europeans would be submitted to the scrutiny of the Court.

Mr. President,

Today Europe enjoys unprecedented democratic stability and prosperity. It is the duty of our generation to take these achievements forward by bringing to peaceful end unresolved regional conflicts, fostering inter-cultural dialogue, combating discrimination and terrorism and promoting greater respect for human rights everywhere in the continent. The Council of Europe and in particular the Parliamentary Assembly can continue to make important contributions towards these goals. As a former member of the Assembly, I call on you to take this challenge.

Thank you.