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Opening remarks of Mr. Stephan Nellen Ambassador of Switzerland

Paper prepared for presentation at the Conference

Military and the Media

Confidence Building between Armed Forces and the Civil Society
Co-organised by
the Geneva Centre for the **Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)**
and **medienhilfe**
Skopje, January 24/25, 2003

Mr. Minister

Dear Participants to the Conference

Ladies and Gentlemen

It was with pleasure that I accepted to make some opening remarks to this conference and it was with pleasure again that I noticed the cooperation of two organizations that are based in Switzerland: DCAF and Medienhilfe.

DCAF as one of the important instruments of the Swiss Government, together with other founding members like the Republic of Macedonia, in the field of peace promotion and human security has taken over a leading role in advising the Macedonian Government in developing a security strategy for the country and in clarifying the role of the military in a modern civil society.

Medienhilfe, on the other side was instrumental, as part of the International Media Fund, in supporting free media in Macedonia during and after the conflict of 2001 through channeling funds from the Swiss Government there were they were most needed.

The cooperation of these two institutions today and tomorrow is really a lucky coincidence. It will guarantee that experts put the focus from two angles on the same subject: military and media. And it is certainly evident to everybody in this room, that conflicts and media are closely interwoven. We are all aware that conflicts only start to exist when there is the media making things public. We all know about the CNN phenomenon that is wherever CNN puts its focus, the world attention will follow. Often, those public media put their focus only on those places, where conflicts have already become violent because "blood sells". Otherwise conflicts are either forgotten or not recognized. A drastic example is the Sudan, where for many years genocide could take place without having been noticed by the world public.

But let me speak about the media in conflict areas. I spent the last three years in this country and have observed all phases of the conflict of 2001. I was often shocked and saddened with the way the media handled the crisis and its underlying causes. And I could recognize myself how important the role of the media in crises time is. Of course things did not deteriorate so bad as for instance in Rwanda in 1994, when Radio Mille Collines was pushing the masses for extinction of the Tutsis. But it was a shame to see how "Bota Sot" was falsifying a photo in order to prove that a rebel fighter in Tetovo who was stopped by the police and who wanted to throw a hand grenade was an innocent victim of the regular security forces. Other media even claimed at that time that the man was only trying to throw his mobile telephone.

Media has the power to be an instrument to fight against war, to contribute to reconciliation and to make the atrocities of a war transparent. But it can also do the contrary: conflicting parties can instrumentalize

media, for example by spreading nationalistic hatred and anger. Media can contribute to the war, a war of words, before there is a war of weapons. The role of the media before the outbreak of an armed conflict is often decisive and can become the real trigger to the real shots.

What we need, are strong, independent and responsible media. Media that are strongly based in the civil society and who have a solid financial background. Media, who are made by independent, well trained and responsible journalists. Media that can contribute to a real civilian control of armed forces as they are respected by the armed forces. Media that can contribute to the public discussion about the strategies of the armed forces, and that can carry the actions of the security sector into the public debate.

And what we also need are armed forces who are composed of responsible officers who are willing to participate in the public debate, who respect the supremacy of the civil society and who are themselves part of the civil society.

Medienhilfe has contributed to the strengthening of the financial base and the quality of the media in the last two years, and it will do so even more so in the future. DCAF is supporting this country in improving its civilian control over the armed forces. This seminar today and tomorrow is a joint effort combining the best energies of the two.

I wish you two days of challenging discussions.

Thank you very much.
