

SPEECH SØREN SØNDERGAARD

Ms. President, dear colleagues.

The theme for this general debate is: Promoting peaceful co-existence and inclusive societies - fighting intolerance.

This is a task and a challenge facing not only some of us. It concerns us all.

I am from a country which might not have the same amount of challenges as many other countries. But

coming from a prosperous, well-functioning and peaceful country is not a guarantee against intolerance.

On the contrary - maybe.

An essential part of Danish democracy is freedom of speech. We will not and we cannot compromise on that.

But exactly because of that, it is crucial that we raise our voices in the public debate when we are faced with racism and lack of respect for other people's beliefs.

Exactly because our society rests upon such a high level of openness and freedom of speech we also have an enduring obligation to fight intolerance.

The present debate is a firm reminder on the need for all of us to deal with this challenge.

We have for sure our own homework to do in Denmark.

But we are not the only ones. And at this point I would like to address our hosts here in Bahrain on behalf of the Danish delegation.

First I will like to thank you for hosting this assembly and for your great hospitality. We appreciate that. But we also have a strong desire.

Since 2011 - for twelve years - a Danish citizen of Bahraini origin, named Abdul-Hadi Al Khawaja has been imprisoned here in Bahrain, some few kilometres away from this conference centre.

He is not a violent criminal - no - he is a human rights defender and a prisoner of conscience.

For his whole life he has fought with peaceful means for democracy and human rights. That was also the reason why he back in 1991 - more than thirty years ago - got political asylum in Denmark. And after some years he became a Danish citizen.

Our description of Al-Khawaja as a human rights defender is not only supported by human rights organisations. It is also backed by the United Nations, which has described his arrest and imprisonment as arbitrary. This position has also been supported by the European Union. Most recently at a meeting in the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Therefore we call on the Bahraini authorities: Free Al-Khawaja!

As a consequence of ill treatment and torture when he was arrested and during his imprisonment the last twelve years, his condition is now very bad.

The Danish IPU delegation has for a long time asked the Bahraini authorities for permission to visit our fellow Danish citizen Al-Khawaja for humanitarian reasons during our stay in Bahrain.

Unfortunately we have got no reply despite several requests. That is regrettable.

But it is never too late. Twelve years must be enough. Releasing Al-Khawaja would be a firm symbol of good faith, which we all would appreciate.

Thank you for listening.