

**Opening Remarks**

**By**

**H.E. Mr. Sihasak Phuanketkeow**

**the President of the Human Rights Council**

**At the Opening of the Third Session of the Forum on Minority Issues**

**14 December 2010**

**Palais des Nation, Room XX**

Madame Chairperson,

Madame High Commissioner for Human Rights

Madame Independent Expert on minority issues

Distinguished delegates and participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my very great pleasure to address you this morning as we open this Third session of the Forum on Minority Issues. I want to begin by welcoming you all and especially those who have travelled far to take part in this important meeting. I also want to welcome the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the representatives of Member States, civil society, intergovernmental organizations and others. I know that many of you are representatives of minority communities, and I am particularly pleased that you are able to be here. We cannot address minority issues adequately, here in the United Nations or anywhere else, without the full and effective participation of minorities themselves. I am therefore delighted to see so many experts in the field of economic and social rights from all regions who

are themselves minorities and who bring their deep understanding of the issues at hand to this event. I also want to congratulate and welcome Prof. Dr. Gita Sen as she takes up her appointment as the Chair of this year's Forum.

Non-discrimination, justice and equality for all are core universal human rights principles upon which the Human Rights Council and the entire work of the United Nations rests. Within the framework of international human rights standards and mechanisms to promote and protect such principles, minority issues have been an important concern of the United Nations since its establishment. They remain so today within the work of the Human Rights Council and its various mechanisms and bodies. I am therefore delighted to see that this essential Forum for discussion of minority issues has, under the inspired guidance of the Independent Expert on minority issues, Ms. Gay McDougall, grown and established itself as a key international platform to confront some of the most pressing minority issues globally.

Since its establishment in Resolution 6/15 of the Human Rights Council in 2007, this Forum has truly fulfilled its mandate to provide a platform for dialogue on minority issues, as is witnessed by the presence of you all here today and the spirit of constructive cooperation which has been a feature of this Forum's work. Within this Forum, minorities and States can voice their concerns freely, discuss their challenges together and work collectively towards shaping sustainable solutions to minority issues. A key objective of the Forum is promoting implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, adopted in 1992.

The substantive outcomes of your deliberations have certainly been important to achieving that goal and will continue to be so.

The Forum has addressed issues of significant importance to minorities globally, issues that have provided persistent challenges for States and minorities alike. The Human Rights Council has welcomed and benefitted from the recommendations of the first two sessions of the Forum on the issues of “Minorities and the Rights to Education” and “Minorities and Effective Political Participation”. The Forum discussions have made a significant contribution to the understanding of those issues and delivered concrete and realizable recommendations for both States and other stakeholders. These recommendations, in which all participants have invested their knowledge and experience, inspire and guide the process of developing solutions that improve the lives of minorities.

Once again you have before you a timely and important issue which provides significant challenges for all States, developed or developing, rich or poor - how to better ensure the effective participation of minorities in economic life and prevent exclusion. I want to reiterate the importance of economic, social and cultural rights to the work of the Human Rights Council. When these rights are fully respected, protected and fulfilled, the conditions are established that enable all to claim their right to participate in economic life no matter what national, ethnic, religious or linguistic group they belong to.

The Human Rights Council is keen to encourage cooperation between the UN mandates that work on minority issues to enable us to better address

these challenges together. Indeed the resolution creating this Forum envisages that it will contribute to efforts to improve such cooperation on activities related to the promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to minorities, including at the regional level. I am delighted therefore to see this expectation born out in practice through the substantive engagement with this Forum of representatives of UN Treaty Bodies and Specialized Agencies, which realize the value of this Forum also to their own work and their consideration of minority issues. This is also expected to ensure that the Forum's work reaches far and wide –beyond this chamber and the Human Rights Council, and that it becomes an effective tool and resource in the hands of States, advocates for minority rights and minority communities themselves.

As many of you may already be aware the Human Rights Council is undertaking a review of its mandate and functions until June 2011. In this review, we have to be objective in assessing where we have succeeded and where we can and must make improvement. There are a number of areas and specific issues that we must address. I believe that the excellent work of this Forum demonstrates what can be achieved in important human rights fields such as minority issues.

In that spirit, I wish you a successful and rewarding meeting.