

**Opening address by
Ms. Hedina Sijerčić
Chair of the sixth session of the
Forum on Minority Issues**

“Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities”

Tuesday, 26 November 2013, 10:00 a.m.

Palais des Nations, Salle XX

**Madam President,
Distinguished delegates and participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Friends and colleagues,**

It is a sincere pleasure for me to address you this morning as we open the sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues on *“Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities”*.

I would like to thank the previous speakers for their kind words on my appointment as Chair of this sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues. I have followed the work of this Forum with great interest and it is a real honour for me to be here in my capacity as Chair of this session.

Living in different countries as a member of the Romani minority, as a citizen, as an asylum seeker, as a refugee, as a migrant, as a permanent citizen,

but always as minority, I have experienced the problems not just of the Other but also problems of the “Other within Other”. In my own Romani community as a woman I have also experienced first-hand the severe problems faced by women belonging to minorities, problems of multiple discrimination that for me result in minority women being a “Third” identity. I can therefore assure you of my strong commitment to this important role as Chair of this sixth session of the Forum. Discrimination of the rights of religious minorities in all regions is a very serious problem which must be discussed in different national and international venues including this Forum, where dialogue and exchange of experience could be heard seriously and patiently and brought to the Human Right Council.

Discrimination and racism against minorities has grown in some places, and it has been seen in all areas of life from birth to death: health care, education, housing, employment, equal opportunities for women, material and spiritual culture. The challenges facing religious minorities are many and include their right to worship freely according to their faith, to access religious education, to freely practice minority religion in minority language. Issues relating to writing the history of religious minorities and building and protecting the places of worship and monuments of religious minorities, bring up questions and problems of discrimination, marginalization and segregation. Regrettably, cultural differences including religious and linguistic differences can still serve to segregate people including youth and educational institutions. These issues bring into question the essential need for the implementation of minority and cultural rights.

This Forum has established itself within the UN as a unique platform for constructive cooperation between all stakeholders, including Member States,

representatives of civil society, the United Nations, its specialized agencies and other international and regional organizations that use this venue to share experiences and promote good practices with regard to the protection of minority rights, including through promoting implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. This Forum marked the 20th anniversary of this crucial document last year and I would like to remind us all of our reaffirmed pledge to uphold the principles enshrined therein.

Key issues relevant to the situation of minorities worldwide have been addressed during previous sessions. Indeed, the Forum has so far focused on the challenges that minorities face in the fields of education, effective political participation and participation in economic life, proposing concrete recommendations to address remaining obstacles. The situation of women belonging to minorities and the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that they may face has also been the subject of the Forum at its fourth session.

Building on these, I am pleased that this sixth session will look more specifically at the situation of religious minorities in an attempt at identifying measures to guarantee their rights and security. I am above all pleased that a particular emphasis will be put on promoting interfaith dialogue, consultation and exchange in this endeavour.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For this Forum and its recommendations to have an impact where it matters most—on the ground and in the lives of persons belonging to minorities—it is

crucial to consistently ensure the active participation of minority representatives from all regions and backgrounds in these proceedings.

At this stage, I would thus like to extend my warm welcome to all representatives from religious minorities who are here, some of whom have travelled from very far to be with us for this important gathering, bringing their first-hand knowledge of the issues at stake. I am sincerely looking forward to hearing their voices and to benefitting from their specific experiences in their overall struggle for equality. I am also taking this opportunity to remind us all of the need to ensure that the diversity of opinions and of situations within all groups, including minority groups, shall be heard and taken into account in our proceedings. Such diversity should also be reflected in the recommendations that will be the result of our debate and presented to the Human Rights Council in March 2014.

Every single one of us in this room today has a role to play in promoting and protecting the rights of religious minorities and towards ensuring that equality for all is indeed a reality. As it has been consistently underlined by my predecessors, let me reiterate that such a dialogue between all actors is particularly essential in light of the fact that there are clearly no simple answers or one-size-fits-all solutions in this field.

While recognising the remaining challenges ahead of us, this gathering is also an opportunity to take stocks of the progress made and to be inspired in our efforts by the positive ideas, success stories and achievements that we will be privileged to hear and to share during these two days.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to Chair this sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues and I am sincerely looking forward to our constructive, respectful and progressive debate.

Thank you very much.