

Statement by Ms Rita Izsák
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Opening comments

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Mr President, distinguished delegates,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to this sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues in my capacity as Independent Expert on minority issues. As I highlighted in my very first annual report to the Human Rights Council in 2012, the rights and security of religious minorities is one of my main thematic priority areas. I noted my particular concern about the disturbing amount of information which has been reaching my mandate and my fellow Special Procedures mandate holders regarding violations of the rights of religious minorities. Religious minorities frequently face discrimination, social exclusion, marginalization and in many instances harassment, persecution and violence. The reality is that, globally, the rights of religious minorities continue to be poorly implemented in practice. Indeed, in some regions the trend seems to be towards a worsening human rights situation for religious minorities. In view of this, I feel that it is particularly important and timely that this sixth Forum should focus on the issues of religious minorities.

In my recent report to the General Assembly I advocate a minority rights-based approach to the protection of religious minorities by States, that includes vital protection of freedom of religion and belief, but which addresses their wider minority rights more effectively. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities requires protection of religious freedom, but also that States to go beyond guarantees relating to the right to worship and manifest religion. The Declaration requires States to protect the religious identity of minorities and encourage conditions to promote that identity. States are obliged to create favourable conditions to enable religious minorities to express their characteristics and develop their culture, customs and religion. But the Declaration also requires positive measures in legislation, policies and practices to create substantive equality for religious minorities in all fields of cultural, economic, public, political and social life. However, frequently these essential minority issues are neglected in many States, leading to challenges in such spheres as education, employment and political participation.

I consider that protection and promotion of the full range of minority rights for religious minorities creates the conditions in which persons from all faiths can not only freely practice their religion, but are well integrated and feel that they are full stakeholders in all aspects of their societies. Protection of minority rights, together with initiatives by States to foster dialogue between faith groups, helps to build a culture of understanding, acceptance and trust across faiths and helps to prevent tensions from emerging and deteriorating into

violence and conflict. Denied such rights, religious minorities frequently report feeling socially excluded, marginalized and sometimes the targets of negative media portrayals and political discourse.

My analysis of the information I receive relating to religious minorities globally reveals disturbing trends. Violations include administrative and legal barriers such as the denial of registration, bans on religious literature, and the prohibition of religious activity or the right to freely assemble, worship and practice religion. Some religious communities face obstacles to the construction of their places of worship while others have experienced the vandalization or destruction of religious property, historic sites and graves. Of particular concern are hate-motivated attacks on individuals and groups, mob violence, bombings and executions. Research reveals that religious minorities face far greater risks both in times of peace and during conflict.

This Forum will cover many issues, however I will focus my comments on just two areas that I believe require particular attention during our work together over the next two days. Firstly, the rising tide of violent attacks against religious minorities. Underlying the full enjoyment of all rights by religious minorities is the guarantee of security. It is the primary duty of States to protect their security and where relationships have deteriorated, violence has increased or patterns of discrimination against religious minorities have become the norm, there is a need for a particularly focused intervention by the State. Protecting the security of religious minorities requires more than reacting to incidents of violence. It requires positive and preventative actions which include active engagement with religious minorities, a full understanding of their situations and security concerns, the monitoring of non-State actors who incite religious hatred, and the establishment of appropriate procedures and concrete measures for the protection of religious minorities. Too often State action to prevent violence is inadequate and responses to violent acts are too little and too late.

Religious minorities often find themselves in conditions of structural vulnerability which can lead to a vicious cycle perpetuating discrimination, hostility, insecurity and violence. As I highlighted in my report to the General Assembly, minority rights-based approaches to the issues of religious minorities help to break this cycle by ensuring full inclusion and guaranteeing equality. Adequate legislation must also be in place as a key component of efforts to address discrimination as well as acts of violence and incitement to religious hatred. But it must be fully enforced in practice with appropriate penalties. States have an obligation to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and punish acts of violence against persons belonging to religious minorities,

regardless of the perpetrator. Failure to do so often leads to repeated and more severe violations.

The second area that I want to highlight is the need for dialogue and inter-faith exchanges. I have been encouraged by the variety of projects around the world that seek to build bridges of understanding and respect between persons belonging to different faiths - majorities and minorities – and some of these will be presented to you in this Forum. These are advanced by States, by non-governmental organisations, or by coalitions of actors. In my report I recommend that States should take a leadership role in the promotion of such inclusive inter-faith projects and exchanges.

The role of religious and political leaders in helping to build tolerant, inclusive societies and initiate and support national efforts cannot be over-stated. Community, religious and political figures should be at the forefront of dialogue and inter-community cohesion efforts as well as publicly condemning religious hatred and violence. Too often leaders remain silent in the face of religious hatred or even participate in anti-minority discourse. The creation of a culture of human rights and of respect for those from all faiths, by all, is key. To achieve this, States have a duty to invest heavily and consistently in educating wider society about minority rights and the value that the diversity that exists in our societies brings. This not only benefits minorities but fundamentally strengthens the fabric of our societies and creates the conditions for stability and peaceful coexistence.

This Forum benefits greatly from the participation of so many Governmental and non-Governmental actors, minority representatives, and other experts in the field of religious minority rights, including young people and women from all regions. It is a unique opportunity to hear all of your voices and an inclusive venue for discussion of these issues and for the elaboration of important recommendations to help protect and promote the rights of religious minorities. I once again welcome you all and I look forward to our work together over the coming days.

Thank you.