

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

FORUM ON MINORITY ISSUES

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Mr Chair, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by saying that at this UN Forum on the theme of preventing violence and atrocities against minorities, it is an honour to speak on the same platform as representatives of communities who are facing such attacks at this very moment: Rohingya from Myanmar, Yazidis and Assyrians from Iraq and Kurds from Syria, Gaboye from Somalia, and Hazara from Pakistan. The fact that such attacks are ongoing even as we deliberate here is sobering, but should also alert us to factors of central importance for avoiding future violence.

The phrase 'never again' has been voiced a number of times these last two days. But what does it mean to say 'never again' when we know that the reality is that atrocities are happening again and again? Those who say 'never again' are of course expressing hope, which is essential, and also a commitment to preventing the recurrence of violence, which we should all share. But it does seem to me that there is also a danger of implying that atrocities against minorities are one-off, rare events, when in fact in a number of states around the world the reality is a continuum of violence, with peaks and troughs, but no real respite over the course, sometimes, of many years.

For the last eight years, Minority Rights Group International has produced the Peoples under Threat index, to provide early warning of potential future mass atrocities. Using methodology developed in the wake of the Rwandan genocide, the index uses a basket of 10 current indicators from authoritative sources to identify situations around the world where communities face the greatest risk of genocide, mass killing, or systematic violent repression. One finding is striking: how those states with a recent history of atrocity are often also those facing the greatest danger of future mass killing even, in some cases, despite a change in government. Two years ago, colleagues in South Sudan asked why their communities remained on our critical list despite the country's independence. Users of the index, particularly in the United States, also asked why we identified a critical level of risk remaining in Iraq in recent years. As we all now know, in both South Sudan and in Iraq, events of the last year have sadly proved the index correct.

Two conclusions quickly follow. The first is that when atrocities occur, prevention cannot be allowed to wait on some future peace-building or democratization phase. It needs to accompany conflict resolution and stabilization efforts from the start. This means that not just immediate protection concerns but also the longer-term grievances of minority communities need to be on the table, whether they concern land tenure, political participation, regional autonomy or linguistic and education rights. Ensuring minorities participate in the formulation of resulting strategies for conflict resolution is essential. It

should be added that it is precisely the point at which violence has already begun and consultation may appear hardest to undertake that it is most valuable.

In many cases only the minority communities themselves will be able to say which protection measures are likely genuinely to improve security, and which risk making the situation worse. It is particularly important that such consultation is not limited to those communities from whose numbers belligerents are drawn; time and again, minority communities which have no history of taking up arms and present no security threat to anyone have been targeted in conflict, and their protection needs may differ significantly from those of other communities.

The second conclusion is that in those country situations of most concern, foreign military intervention is now not the exception but the norm. Whether it be the deployment of a multi-lateral force under the auspices of the African Union, of NATO, or the UN, a military intervention launched by a foreign government or governments, or the arming and logistical support of proxy militias by neighbouring or interested states, the great majority of countries where the threat of mass killing is acute or killing is ongoing have been subject to armed intervention, in some cases on several occasions going back a decade or more. The Democratic Republic of Congo is a case in point.

There is a complex causal relationship between civilian security and armed intervention in practice. While it is possible that foreign military intervention may halt an episode of mass civilian killing or decrease its intensity, it may also prolong or intensify killing, or even initiate a general conflict where there was none before. In some cases, it may end one conflict, but start another; or have the effect of shifting violence away from one people or population group onto another or others.

Often debates on pillar III of the Responsibility to Protect, concentrating as they often do on the single question of whether it is right to launch an intervention, seem simplistic and out of step with the reality of multiple and continuous interventions in situations where minorities face recurrent violence from multiple actors.

Perhaps one thing that this UN Forum can do is to ensure that in such situations the voices of minorities are not silenced.

Since the occupation of the Crimea region of Ukraine in March 2014 by the Russian Federation, the minority Crimean Tatar population have been subject to numerous cases of violence, intimidation, and even enforced disappearance. Attempts by activists to raise attention to such incidents outside the Crimea, have also been met with violence and intimidation. On 18 September a leading Tatar human rights defender was dragged from his car by unidentified men, beaten, and had his passport stolen, preventing him attending the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York and the OSCE HDIM meeting in Poland, where he was due to speak.

The Russian Federation needs to make full efforts to investigate and resolve cases of forced disappearances and violence towards Crimean Tatar activists and to prevent the stifling of civil society and other representatives of the Crimean Tatar. In particular, both international and local civil society organisations need to be enabled to monitor the human rights situation in Crimea freely and without harassment.