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Seventh Session of the United Nations

Forum on Minority Issues

**“Preventing and addressing violence and atrocity crimes
targeted against minorities”**



United Nations
Human Rights

OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Opening remarks by

Mr. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

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10:00-13:00

Room XX, Palais des Nations

Excellencies,

Colleagues and Friends.

Good morning. This is my first opportunity to address the annual Forum on Minority Issues, and I welcome all of you to this important event. This year's topic, **preventing and addressing violence and atrocity crimes targeted against minorities**, is a particularly vital one.

Prejudice is a persistent and highly corrosive element in society. Its effect is to heighten inequalities. Poor and marginalized people then become more vulnerable to attack – from criminals, from bigots, and as the scapegoats targeted by organised campaigns egged on by unscrupulous leaders, for their own political or personal benefit.

A nightmarish litany of mass atrocity crimes have taken place in human history: genocides, acts of ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Several have occurred in our own lifetimes, and indeed, some are ongoing today. In many cases this slaughter has been perpetrated on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion, singling out minority communities on the basis of their supposed differences, or perceived historical grievances, many of them ancient and highly questionable.

None of these atrocities crimes were unleashed without warning. They built up over years – and sometimes decades – of human rights grievances. Among them we must count deficient or corrupt governance and judicial institutions; discrimination and exclusion of minorities; inequities in development; exploitation and denial of economic and social rights; and repression of civil society and public freedoms.

Human rights – and among them, the rights of minorities – are central to the prevention and mitigation of atrocity crimes. Patterns of human rights violations, including sexual violence and discrimination against minorities, provide early warning of an escalation of crisis. If human rights interventions can be made at such time – as they should be – then the crisis may dissipate. My Office has experience of many such interventions.

The human rights agenda is also a detailed road-map for ways to resolve disputes. The specifics of each situation are, of course, unique, but whether we are working in Colombia, Nepal, Ukraine or the Central African Republic, one crucial element is to re-establish the very simple fact that members of minorities have exactly the same human rights as everybody else.

OHCHR's field offices spend a significant portion of their time on training – for government officials, for members of security and police forces, and for civil society groups. The core drive is to translate human rights into practical measures: how to question people without using torture; how to manage peaceful protests; how to ensure that minorities can raise their voices and participate fully in the life of a nation. We also work in the longer term, to strengthen laws and institutions that protect rights. And we seek to empower human rights defenders and civil society activists of all kinds – including activists for minority rights – so that they can confront prejudice effectively and with confidence.

States must be willing to protect the human rights of their people, and people must be able to hold the State responsible. I am certain that among the distinguished representatives of minorities in this audience, many can speak for the strong effect this work has had.

Clashes are not inevitable. People are not born with a sense of hatred against one another or for those of another faith or ethnic identity. Babies do not spontaneously generate a fixed categorisation of people into groups of enemies or friends. Hatred is socially constructed, by custom, or for political or economic reasons – competition for power, land and resources, for example. And it is greatly assisted by a fixed approach that insists on seeing people in terms of only one dimension.

As the Indian economist Amartya Sen points out in his thought-provoking book *Identity and Violence*, every human being has many identities – related to gender, nationality, language, location, class, religion, occupation, political beliefs, personal inclinations and so on. To ignore this, and to set up stark and belligerent divisions between people, is short-sighted. We need a much more capacious vision. If I may quote Amartya Sen for a moment, “*The best hope for peace in the world lies in the simple but far-reaching recognition that we all have many different associations and affiliations; we are not rigidly divided by a single categorization of hardened groups which confront each other.*”

This recognition of blurred and cross-cutting identities – of the wonderful diversity of individuals and cultures within our shared membership of humanity – is a source of tremendous enrichment. Thus my Office takes a leading role in inter-agency work on minority issues within the UN, in cooperation with the Special Rapporteur on minority issues and this Forum, as well as CERD and other relevant human rights monitoring mechanisms.

Among other aspects, this work involves coordinating the UN Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, which the Secretary-General set up in 2012 to enhance cooperation on these issues within the Organisation. The Network, which consists of 23 UN entities, has developed a Guidance Note on Racial Discrimination and Minorities whose 19 recommendations were endorsed by the Secretary-General last year. They emphasize the importance of attending to the needs of the most marginalized and at-risk minority groups.

We need much more effective measures for early warning and prevention of systematic violence and atrocity crimes. We need to define more clearly and consistently not just whether to act, but where, when and how. The Secretary-General's 'Human Rights up Front' Initiative is an unequivocal commitment that will further advance our efforts to promote and protect human rights around the world. It brings human rights protection more clearly to the centre of the UN's work, and ensures that human rights information and analysis will be more rapidly available, forming the basis for coherent, system-wide strategies in response to the risk of serious human rights violations and atrocities.

This initiative offers a unique opportunity to integrate minority rights protection more systematically into the UN's strategies, policies and programmes for prevention – making it potentially a very powerful instrument of change.

I also consider the work that is done here in this Forum to be essential. As the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Minorities clearly states, minority rights are essential to ensure equality, and to guarantee human dignity and social and political stability in the long term. Minority rights help to build peaceful societies that respect and celebrate their diversity. And protection of minority rights is not only a moral imperative, for they are quite simply essential to achieving sustainable human development, democratic governance and peace in the long-term.

Each of us looks at the world through a different lens, defined by our beliefs and opinions, our personalities, backgrounds and experiences. And it is plain that different societies and communities – with different cultural frameworks, traditions and sets of challenges – have developed unique strengths and weaknesses in serving their members. But every State, when it commits to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, agrees that the values that it contains are greater than our differences. The principles of human rights apply to all and can inspire all. They are sufficiently feasible and adaptable to be applied in every

social, economic and political circumstance; in every geography, every cultural and religious context; and at all times. And not only *can* they be applied – what the Universal Declaration says is that they *must* be.

I look forward to your advice and to your ideas, so that we can further advance our work together.

Thank you

- 10 minutes