

Item 3 # 22

**Ninth Session- United Nations Forum on Minority Issues**

Panel III- *Protecting minority rights during humanitarian crises.*

Geneva, 24 November 2016

**Statement by Austria**

Mr. President,

Let me start by congratulating you on your election as the chair of the 9<sup>th</sup> session of the forum on minority issues.

The forum has established itself as the foremost international platform for dialogue among all stakeholders from within and outside the UN system on the promotion and protection of the rights of minorities. It has enabled to hear the voice of minorities from all over the world and provides us with an essential opportunity for sharing best practices and promoting mutual understanding of minority issues. As main sponsor of the resolutions on minorities' issues and on Internally Displaced Persons in the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, Austria particularly welcomes this year's timely thematic focus of the forum.

An estimated 125 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance worldwide including unprecedented numbers of persons displaced worldwide with situations of protracted conflict and violence creating increasingly large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. Due to the specific challenges they often face because of pre-existing situations of discrimination or lack of inclusion in planning and preparation, minority communities are often disproportionately affected during conflict or disaster.

The Forum's draft recommendations underline the primary responsibility of the state to contribute continually to building resilient and prepared minority communities able to actively respond when crises arise; and if and when a crisis occurs, to provide timely appropriate assistance that is relevant to minority communities' specific needs. In many cases only the minority communities themselves will be able to assess which protection measures are likely genuinely to improve security, and which risk making the situation worse. Therefore, the establishment of dedicated institutions to take the lead in mainstreaming attention to minorities and in monitoring their situation as well as the participation of minorities themselves at the political level is essential.

Austria's national minorities enjoy special protection, both at constitutional level and on the basis of numerous other legal sources, including the Ethnic Groups Act. In terms of political representation and to advise the Government and its ministers in matters relating to minorities, an Advisory Council has been set up at the Federal Chancellery for each of the six legally recognized ethnic groups. The Government supports ethnic groups in manifold ways

under the ethnic group promotion programme, including through financial means. In 2015 a total of € 3.868.000 has been provided for in this regard. In addition, under certain conditions, the languages of ethnic groups are admitted as official languages before courts and administrative authorities. In certain areas of the Austrian territory, names and signs of topographic character must be indicated both in German and in the language of the respective ethnic group.

In the main strategic document on Austria's humanitarian assistance, the Three Year Programme on Austrian Development Policy, we have put a specific focus on the inclusion of vulnerable groups throughout the whole project cycle. We have also made commitments at the World humanitarian Summit to empower local humanitarian action as well as resilience building.

At the international level, UN institutions, funds, programs and organizations must be prepared to be able to actively contribute to the task of protecting minorities in humanitarian crises. In this context we should explore further the possibility of a more efficient mainstreaming of minority issues into all bodies of the United Nations. We welcome the initiatives that the Special Rapporteur has taken in this regard such as the organization of the recent consultative session in New York and encourage her to continue contributing to a deeper integration of minority issues also in the peace and security agenda of the UN. We hope that our discussions during the two days will also be a starting point for ECOSOC to consider the specific situation of minorities during its humanitarian segment and that this Forum will be able to make a recommendation to ECOSOC in including the specific needs and abilities of minorities in its discussions of coordinated responses to humanitarian crises.

In closing, let me reiterate once again our conviction that diversity and pluralism pose no risk to our societies, but are a source of development, progress and peace. There may be many different ways in addressing the risks that minorities face in humanitarian crises, but irrespectively of national contexts they all should share a common objective: the promotion and protection of persons belonging to minorities. Austria will continue its strong engagement in this direction and we are confident that the ideas and recommendations voiced at this Forum will form a good basis for further progress.

Thank you very much.