

Statement by H.E. Alex Van Meeuwen

President of the Human Rights Council

Opening of the second session of the
United Nations Forum on Minority Issues

Thursday, 12 November 2009, 10:00 a.m.

Palais des Nations, Salle XX

**Madam Chairperson,
Deputy High Commissioner,
Independent Expert,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,**

It is a great honor for me to address you at this opening of the second session of the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues.

At the outset, I would like to warmly welcome and express my gratitude to Ms. Barbara Lee, member of the United States House of Representatives, who has kindly accepted the important task of chairing this meeting.

I would also like to express my warm welcome to the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights who is joining us today, as well as to the representatives of Member States, United Nations specialised agencies, representatives of the human rights treaty bodies, international and regional organisations, national human rights institutions, as well as non-governmental organisations, academic and experts.

I would like to extend a special welcome to all those minority political actors from around the world who have travelled to Geneva to share their experiences with the Forum participants, and bring their wealth of first-hand knowledge to this important gathering.

My gratitude goes also to the Independent Expert on minority issues, Ms. Gay McDougall, who is mandated to guide the work of this Forum and has certainly set a high standard for this annual meeting last year. The inaugural session of the Forum on “Minorities and the Right to Education”, which took place on 15 and 16 December 2008 in this Palais was indeed a great success both in terms of participation and in terms of outcome. It benefited from the participation of over 370 individuals from diverse backgrounds and produced a series of comprehensive yet concrete recommendations. The Independent Expert on Minority Issues presented these recommendations in her report to the Human Rights Council at its 10th session in March 2009.

As you will be aware, this Forum was established in September 2007 by Human Rights Council resolution 6/15 which emphasizes inter alia, the importance of dialogue among relevant stakeholders on the promotion and protection of the rights of minorities, the sharing of best practices as well as the promotion of mutual understanding of minority issues. It also highlights “the importance of national processes aimed at promoting and strengthening dialogue between all relevant stakeholders on issues relating to the rights of persons belonging to national, or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities with a view to ensuring the realization of their rights without discrimination and to help build stable societies”.

This Forum offers a unique opportunity for engagement and dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders and, when looking at the list of participants as well as the different agenda items that will be addressed over the next few days, I am confident that this meeting will again this year contribute greatly to the overall objectives of the Council, as outlined in GA resolution 60/251, in particular cooperation and genuine dialogue.

The views of experts and participants from minority communities are given particular prominence at this Forum, which this year focuses on “Minorities and effective political participation”. The organisers have made great efforts to bring as many political actors to this meeting as possible and I certainly hope that their all-embracing levels of experience will feed into the discussions and ultimately be reflected in the recommendations, which will be presented by the Independent Expert to the Human Rights Council in March 2010.

Participants in this Forum will also have the opportunity to attend two very interesting side-events focusing on “Minority women and effective political

participation”, which will be held today, and “The Minorities Declaration: Challenges and opportunities”, scheduled for tomorrow.

Madam Chairperson,
Ladies and gentlemen,

While still at its early stage, this Forum can certainly build on its achievements, by taking full advantage of the variety of stakeholders present in this same room, and strive to forge an inter-active and productive dialogue, which will hopefully continue beyond these two days. I trust that this meeting will contribute to a better understanding of “meaningful and effective political participation of minorities” and of the existing standards and principles, and strive for an improved inter-cultural approach to political participation based on the sharing of good practices.

I wish to conclude by expressing, once again, the Human Rights Council’s full support to your work and by wishing you a very successful second session of the Forum on Minority Issues.

Thank you.