

Mr. President

Madam Chairperson,

High Commissioner,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants,

It is a pleasure to welcome all of you to the second annual session of the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues. The aims and objectives of this annual Forum on Minority Issues are established in Human Rights Council resolution 6/15, which requires that the Independent Expert on Minority Issues shall guide the work of the Forum and prepare its annual meetings. The Forum is established to:

1. provide a platform for dialogue and cooperation on issues pertaining to persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities;
2. provide thematic contributions and expertise to the work of the Independent Expert on minority issues;
3. identify and analyse best practices, challenges, opportunities and initiatives for the further implementation of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Minorities;
4. produce thematic recommendations to be reported to the Human Rights Council ; and
5. contribute to efforts to improve cooperation among UN mechanisms, bodies and specialized agencies, funds and programmes on activities related to the promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to minorities, including at the regional level.

Our procedure will follow the format of last year's Forum. A limited number of presenters have been asked to introduce each agenda item. Discussions under each agenda item will then be open to all participants according to requests to be placed on the speakers list. In order to allow the largest possible participation and to have a more inter-active format, we ask that interventions during the discussion period be limited to no more than 3 minutes and be focused on the draft Recommendations and:

- a) the identification of challenges and problems facing minorities and States;
- b) the identification of good practices; and
- c) the consideration of opportunities, initiatives and solutions.

This Forum will seek to provide concrete and tangible outcomes in the form of thematic recommendations of practical value to all stakeholders. Therefore, a set of draft action-oriented recommendations has been made available to all participants. It will constitute the basis for discussions during the two-day session.

Given that the principal nature of this Forum is to be a platform for dialogue, we will not seek to negotiate the provisions of the Recommendations or to adopt the Recommendations as a body. Rather as called for in resolution 6/15, the thematic Recommendations will be reported to the Human Rights Council in my upcoming annual report.

The Forum truly offers a unique and essential opportunity to come together in a spirit of cooperation and constructive endeavour to address some of the key minority issues that continue to challenge states and minorities in all regions. This second session of the Forum will focus on an issue of utmost importance to minorities and States around the world: "Effective Political

Participation”.

Societies flourish when all voices are heard, when all opinions are considered; when all citizens participate; and when the talent that exists in all communities is enabled to contribute to political institutions. Inclusion is good for societies at large, not just for those previously left out. So, creating the conditions for the effective participation of minorities should be considered by States as an integral aspect of **good governance and a key priority in their efforts to ensure equality and non-discrimination.**

The right to effective participation is a fundamental human right, which underpins the realization of all other rights of persons belonging to ethnic or national, religious and linguistic minorities. It creates legitimate avenues through which minorities can express and protect their identities and promote all their human rights with dignity. The inclusion of minorities into the existing political processes of nations promotes **social cohesion and unity and creates the conditions under which all may prosper.**

Central to our efforts to ensure the political participation of minorities is the right to non-discrimination and the obligation of States to undertake positive measures where necessary to achieve a status of equality for all. The full and effective participation of minorities in all areas of public life is a concept that encompasses not only participation in political decision-making at both the local and national levels. It also requires that persons belonging to minorities should be given the means to participate effectively in the social and economic spheres of their societies and the right to equal access to public services. It is important to recognize, for example, that the

content of the right to vote is significantly diminished if the right to education is denied. The goal therefore is to achieve **a fair and just society in which minorities achieve equality in all fields of life and are confident that they are full stakeholders in societies in which their voices are heard.**

Public participation takes many forms. It comprises the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, the right to vote and to be elected, and to have access to public services. Moreover, it entails participation in all governmental bodies, the judiciary and agencies of the criminal justice system, like the police. It also encompasses participation in economic and social life as well as access on a non-discriminatory basis to employment, land and property, housing, health care, social welfare and pensions, among others. Effective participation of minorities can also be promoted through decentralized and local forms of government, consultation mechanisms, as well as through cultural or limited arrangements of territorial autonomy.

Distinguished Participants,

Minority political actors, experts, government officials, representatives of the Treaty Bodies, UN Specialized Agencies and civil society representatives, have gathered in this room today to participate in this second session of the Forum on Minority Issues. In addition to many distinguished delegates from Member States, over 100 minorities from all regions are here, representing perhaps millions of others worldwide, who are actively pursuing greater and more effective political participation for themselves and their communities. Some are members of national or provincial parliaments; some are members of local city or village councils or are Mayors. Some are people who have run for office and those who have represented their

communities through civil society activities and other established national institutions. Some are experts on electoral processes or voter engagement. I welcome you all and look forward your contributions.

Now, I am pleased to introduce to the Forum participants, the Chairperson of this Second Forum on Minorities and Effective Political Participation.

United States Congresswoman Barbara Lee has represented California's 9th Congressional District since 1998.

Congresswoman Lee was sworn in as the Chairwoman of the U.S. Congressional Black Caucus on January 6, 2009. The 42-member Congressional Black Caucus is one of the longest standing caucuses in Congress and is often referred to as the “conscience of the Congress” for their willingness to tackle the most serious social and economic issues facing minorities in the United States.

As co-chair of the Congressional Out of Poverty Caucus, Congresswoman Lee is committed to eradicating poverty, fostering opportunity and protecting the most vulnerable in American society. Additionally, Congresswoman Lee has been a leader in promoting policies that foster international peace, security and human rights.