

**Statement by H.E. Iruthisham Adam, Vice- President of the Human Rights Council, on behalf of the President**

Opening of the sixth session of the  
Forum on Minority Issues

Tuesday, 26 November 2013, 10:00 a.m.  
Palais des Nations, Salle XX

**Madam Chair,  
Distinguished delegates and participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great pleasure for me to open this sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues focusing on “*Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities*”.

Firstly, I would like to warmly welcome Ms. Hedina Sijerčić, who has kindly accepted the important task of chairing this session of the Forum, and Ms. Rita Izsák, the Independent Expert on minority issues, who is mandated by the Council to guide the work of this Forum. I would also like to welcome representatives of Member States, United Nations specialized agencies, representatives of human rights mechanisms and bodies, international and regional organizations, national human rights institutions, as well as non-governmental organizations, academics and experts.

One of the main objectives of this Forum, is to provide a platform for promoting dialogue and cooperation on issues pertaining to minorities - an open space where all stakeholders involved in the promotion and the protection of the rights of minorities in all regions could meet, exchange ideas and learn from each other’s experiences. I am particularly pleased that this Forum has been successful in bringing together hundreds of minorities from all over the world, who travel to Geneva to share their personal experiences. I would therefore like to extend a special welcome to all representatives from religious minorities, who are here today and will contribute substantively to the Forum’s proceedings and to shaping its recommendations.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities remains an essential international standard for

minorities and for States alike. These two days provide a unique opportunity to further elaborate on how we can implement the Declaration in many practical ways.

The issues that will be discussed here - the rights of religious minorities - are highly relevant to the work of the Human Rights Council and have been consistently addressed by the Council's different procedures and mechanisms. For example, in its resolution 22/20 of March 2013, renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the Human Rights Council expressed deep concern at the rise of religious extremism and at the increasing number of acts of violence directed against individuals, including persons belonging to religious minorities in various parts of the world. It emphasised that States should exercise "*due diligence to prevent, investigate and punish acts of violence against persons belonging to religious minorities*". The resolution also points to the need for States to promote "*mutual understanding, tolerance, non-discrimination and respect in all matters relating to freedom of religion or belief by encouraging, in society at large, a wider knowledge of different religions and beliefs and of the history, traditions, languages and cultures of the various religious minorities existing within their jurisdiction*".

The Council has also adopted resolutions on "*Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief*". Its resolutions propose an action-oriented approach to combating religious intolerance that protects freedoms of expression and religion and calls for specific measures to combat religious intolerance. The objectives include identifying best practices, producing concrete proposals in such areas as training government officials, establishing enforcement mechanisms, and engaging with members of religious communities. In its resolutions, the Council also welcomes "*international, regional and national initiatives aimed at promoting interreligious, intercultural and interfaith harmony and combating discrimination against individuals on the basis of religion or belief*" and recognizes the importance that "*open, public debate of ideas, as well as interfaith and intercultural dialogue, at the local, national and international levels, can be among the best protections against religious intolerance and can play a positive role in strengthening democracy and combating religious hatred*", helping to overcome existing misperceptions.

This session of the Forum is therefore timely in providing such space for an open debate of ideas and I hope that all participants will seize this opportunity for discussion of

practical solutions to improve the lives of religious minorities everywhere, including through interfaith dialogue, consultation and exchange.

This session will also undoubtedly contribute to helping States to identify ways by which they can achieve the objectives of ensuring inclusive, harmonious multi-faith societies in which all may freely practice their religion and live together in equality. We look forward to the recommendations that will be the outcome of your work during this session and that will be presented by the Independent Expert on minority issues to the Human Rights Council in March 2014.

Madam Chair, Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish you all a fruitful, constructive and inter-active dialogue over the next two days; another successful Forum on Minority Issues.

Thank you.