

**Prevention of violence against religious minorities: Challenges and  
Prospects.**

**Remarks by Mr. Adama Dieng, the United Nations Under-Secretary  
General, and the UN Secretary General Special Adviser on the  
Prevention of Genocide delivered on the occasion of the Sixth  
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**Madam Chairperson,**

**Distinguished guests,**

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

**Dear friends,**

At the outset, I would like to express my profound appreciation to the Independent Expert on Minority issues, Rita Izsak, for convening this important event. It is because of her extraordinary leadership and commitment, that we witness an ongoing momentum on the part of the international community to address challenges facing minorities. I would also like to thank minority groups' representatives, member states, civil society, intergovernmental organizations as well as academics and experts from all over the world who, despite their pressing commitments, have made time to come to Geneva and participate in this forum. Your participation demonstrates the importance and commitment you attach to minority issues.

My brief remarks will focus on the link between the prevention of atrocity crimes and the protection of religious rights for minorities. More specifically, I would like to highlight how the concept of the responsibility to protect applies and enhances the protection of minorities. As most of us know, in 2005, at the World Summit, the UN member states made a commitment to protect their populations from atrocity crimes.

In this Declaration, states acknowledged and reaffirmed responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity as well as from their incitement. In fact the word 'populations' should be understood to refer to all people living within a state's territory, including its national, ethnic,

religious, and linguistic minorities. Indeed, this commitment enshrined in the World Summit Outcome Document is very much in line with Article one of the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, according to which the primary duty of States in relation to religious minorities is to protect their fundamental rights and security.

In the 1992 Declaration, the GA stressed the relationship between minority protection and protection of human rights. According to the Declaration, the realization of rights, enjoyed by persons belonging to a minority contributes to political and social stability in the state they live in. While the Declaration is not binding, it demonstrates that the majority of states accept that the individual character of a minority rights entail duties of the state to protect the group as a whole because the group is formed by persons entitled with minority rights.

In general, minority rights are to be enjoyed in addition to existing rights. Minority rights as special rights allow members of minority communities to start off on a platform of equality with majorities. As amply observed by the UN independent expert on minority issues 'minority rights go beyond anti discrimination to address the issues of those who may seek to promote and preserve their distinct identity. The opportunity to participate fully and effectively in all aspects of society, while preserving group identity, is essential to true equality and may require positive steps on the part of government. Minority rights . . . are about recognizing that, owing to their minority status and distinct identity, some groups are disadvantaged and are at times targeted, and that these communities need special protection and empowerment.

**Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,**

It is unfortunate that, practice in different parts of the world demonstrate that minorities continue to experience high level of marginalization, stigmatization, discrimination in access to social, economic, political and cultural opportunities, both in time of peace and during armed conflicts. As a matter of fact, minorities often find themselves in conditions of structural vulnerability that exposes them to a vicious circle of discrimination, hostility, insecurity, violence and extreme poverty. It is therefore not surprising that, due to this sustained discrimination, minorities find themselves at the receiving end in which their basic rights and freedoms are constantly violated with minimal or no redress altogether. When conflicts break out, minorities become the primary targets and victims of atrocity crimes.

I am convinced that ensuring respect for the rights of minorities and protecting those rights play an important role in the prevention of conflicts which is the major source of atrocity crimes. Societies in which the rights of all population groups – including those of minorities – are guaranteed and protected and where diversity is celebrated and coexistence cherished, chances are higher that conflicts are less likely to occur. I say this because there is an obvious connection between the protection of minority rights and the prevention of conflict. This connection emanates from the reality that when the society can guarantee the rights of its entire people, especially the weaker and the marginalized, it is evident that such society will live in harmony and coexist peacefully.

Despite this connection between conflicts and atrocity crimes, it is also true that, atrocity crimes can happen in a non-conflict situation especially where minorities are persecuted on religious or ethnic basis or beliefs. I therefore believe that by developing a comprehensive strategy for the protection of minorities we will also contribute towards preventing mass atrocities. In other words, the role of minority rights' protection and dedicated minority rights mechanisms in promoting social stability and cohesion will also serve to build resilience against atrocity crimes.

Although the State bears the primary responsibility for the protection of minorities within its territory, it is also true that other actors have a responsibility. For example, the State is responsible for establishing and maintaining protective structures within state institutions, to guarantee the rule of law and human rights, equal access to justice, and participation in public life for its entire people. On the other hand, civil society play an essential role in monitoring and reporting on the situation of minority groups and holding the State accountable, while community and religious leaders are fundamental in fostering inter-communal relations and coexistence. Finally, the media have a key role to play in upholding ethical standards when reporting and disseminating information. It is these roles that make the protection of minorities a shared responsibility.

**Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guest,**

In order to explore ways to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes, the Joint Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect organised an expert meeting in Geneva on the margins of the 22<sup>nd</sup> session of the Human Rights Council, in February 2013. The meeting followed a call for the Rabat Plan of Action - the outcome document of a series of regional workshops on preventing incitement to national, racial or religious hatred organised by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2011 and 2012. Essentially the Plan implores state and non state actors to go beyond a legal approach in dealing with incitement to atrocity crimes and develop a much broader set of policy options to prevent and curb incitement.

Following the outcome of the Geneva expert seminar, a policy paper entitled "preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes: policy options for action," was prepared. The paper has a specific focus on preventing incitement in

situations where violence - and the risk of atrocity crimes - is imminent but where the window of opportunity for preventive action exists. Experts in Geneva underlined the need to pay special attention to preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes in certain situations, particularly in the context of religious tensions. I launched the policy paper in New York on 26 September, during a side event to the 68<sup>th</sup> General Assembly co-hosted by Belgium. The policy paper will also be presented here in Geneva tomorrow during a side event to this Forum. I very much hope to see you all at the event. My Office will disseminate the policy paper widely.

Drawing from one of the main findings of this policy paper - that religious leaders have a paramount role in preventing and curbing incitement, My Office has decided to organise a forum with senior religious leaders and groups to explore their specific contribution to prevent atrocity crimes. This forum, which will likely take place in the first half of 2014, aims ultimately to enhance societies' resilience to atrocity crimes.

My Office has also developed a training programme for States. The purpose of this programme is to build and enhance states' capacities to recognize risk factors for atrocity crimes and identify possible preventive measures to be implemented at national level. The Office has so far conducted training with more than 40 Member States. Moreover, we have been assisting States to carry out activities to address the risk of inter-communal tensions that could lead to violence. For example, this year the Office has facilitated a number of peace forums in Tanzania, organised by the Tanzania National Committee for the Prevention of Genocide, War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity and all forms of Discrimination. The forums brought together Muslim and Christian communities for dialogue and identified measures to prevent further tensions and the risk of violence at the local and national level.

In addition, my Office has publicly warned against the risk of religious and sectarian tensions in a number of situations, most recently in the Central African Republic, Egypt, Myanmar and Syria. I have been extremely concerned about the situation in the Central African Republic, where there is a high risk of violence along religious lines in a country where these communities have traditionally lived together peacefully. I plan to visit the country in a near future to assess the situation there and appraise the Secretary General and the Security Council accordingly.

Ladies and gentleman,

Before I conclude, let me reiterate my belief that it is through our enduring faith in our common humanity that we can realize society premised on equality, justice and harmonious coexistence. We have to reaffirm our commitment to work together to advance religious tolerance among diverse groups of our people. It is the responsibility of both state and non state actors to promote and guarantee fundamental rights for the majority and minorities alike. We cannot prevent conflicts and their underlying consequences if we are unable to guarantee equal rights and dignity of the weaker and downtrodden in our midst.

Given that populations are often targeted based on their identity or religious belief, this commitment is even more important in a globalised world, where migratory flows are contributing to making states more and more heterogeneous and less tolerant of the 'outsiders'. By taking active measures to respect and protect the rights of minorities, States create the conditions for social stability and cohesion, thus enhancing the rule of law and respects of the fundamental rights and freedoms for all.

I thank you very much for your attention.