

Check against delivery

Statement by Rita Izsák
SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON MINORITY ISSUES

7th session of the Forum on Minority Issues

Opening comments

25 November 2014

Geneva

Mr President, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to this seventh session of the Forum on Minority Issues in my capacity as Special Rapporteur on minority issues. Let me first say that I deeply regret that I cannot be with you in person this year due to the imminent arrival of my second child.

This year's session will address a particularly relevant and timely topic, "preventing and addressing violence and atrocity crimes targeted against minorities". Regrettably, persons belonging to national, ethnic and religious minorities are frequently the victims of violence in all regions of the world. Violence in all its forms destroys the lives of individuals, families and communities and inflicts vast suffering on those affected. It also damages whole societies and causes divisions that can last for generations. We must never forget that behind the cold, hard statistics of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and other forms of atrocities, are human beings just like us. Their lives must be protected and the stories of those who have suffered from violence must be told to help us protect new generations.

Tackling the cycle of violence starts by reflecting on its root causes. A better understanding of root causes allows us to be better at putting in place effective measures to prevent violence from being unleashed. In my recent report to the General Assembly, I stated that the factors and conditions behind the violence experienced by disadvantaged minorities are multiple, including their numerical size, their non-dominant social, economic and political position, historical and unresolved grievances, social stigma against them and the suspicion and prejudice with which they are often viewed by the majority.

I would like to highlight here some of the social and political conditions that contribute to make minorities vulnerable to violence, and that I have had the chance to see for myself in some of the countries that I have visited.

The existence of gross inequalities and persistent poverty are frequently underlying conditions contributing to making minorities vulnerable to violence. Disadvantaged minorities are frequently the poorest of the poor in society and therefore they are not sufficiently equipped to defend themselves and claim their rights. This disadvantaged position of minorities also translates into a lack of minority members in government positions and law enforcement and justice bodies, which means that their voices, concerns and the early warning signs of violence often go unnoticed.

Deficits in democracy, good and inclusive governance and the rule of law create the conditions under which violence against minorities may take place. This is

particularly true where these deficits are coupled with other conditions such as competition over territory, resources and power, biased politics and favoritism along ethnic or religious lines, which results in tensions between communities.

Hate speech and incitement to ethnic or religious hatred can also contribute to start and fuel violence against minorities, particularly when initiated by prominent figures, including politicians, religious leaders and public officials and broadcasted in mass media. I am very concerned by the misuse of social media nowadays, which has proven to be an effective means to foster and incite violence against particular individuals and groups when manipulated by extremist and terrorist organizations.

We must also be aware that once the violence against minority groups has broken out, in many cases it is committed with total impunity, which reinforces the cycle of violence. In addition, legislative, justice and institutional structures and environments often fail to provide adequate protection against attacks or the possibility of redress for victims and appropriate penalties for perpetrators, leaving perpetrators free and victims even more vulnerable.

This Forum will cover many issues and reflect on the measures to adequately prevent and address violence against minorities once it has started. In my report to the General Assembly, I analyzed as well some of the key elements necessary to prevent violence against minorities. Let me briefly refer to some of these measures.

Firstly, it is necessary to guarantee full compliance with international standards for equality, non-discrimination and minority rights, as well as good and inclusive governance. Full implementation of minority rights not only enables national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities to enjoy their rights in equality, but helps to create a social environment of respect, understanding and acceptance of diversity which is conducive to the peaceful coexistence of different groups.

This legislative framework of protection for minorities is necessary but not sufficient. It must be complemented with dedicated institutional attention to minority issues, through the establishment of specialized departments or bodies with responsibility for minority and inter-ethnic and inter-religious issues. This institutional attention ensures that consideration is given to minority issues at an early stage, ideally with the full participation of all minorities. It can increase governments' capacity to engage with and consult minorities and to identify problems, threats and concerns before they escalate.

Nevertheless, sometimes the threat of violence against minorities is such that it requires an immediate security response in order to prevent imminent violence or quickly respond to it. In such situations, it is the responsibility of the national authorities and law enforcement bodies to act decisively and appropriately. States must look at such issues as the ethnic or religious make-up and deployment of security forces as well as providing training to them to ensure that they are able to respond appropriately and effectively to threats or violence against one community by another.

This obligation is also reflected in the principle of Responsibility to Protect, which emphasizes the primary responsibility of States to protect their populations by preventing genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In this regard, adequate training of law-enforcement personnel as well as sufficient provision of resources made available to them to fulfil their duties is crucial to provide a satisfactory response.

As envisaged in the Responsibility to Protect, States should also benefit from the cooperation with international and regional organizations, as these organizations have a significant role in preventing a responding to violence by engaging with States in a preventive, fact-finding or conflict mediation capacity. Some regional human rights organizations have specific tools dedicated to minority issues and conflict and violence prevention based on strong regional standards. I also want to state quite clearly that the United Nations must do better in its prevention role and its responses once violence has broken out. To do so requires the political will of Member States. I consider that far greater attention to minority issues worldwide is required not just through this Forum and the Human Rights Council, but in the important work of the General Assembly and the Security Council.

Last but not least, I want to recognize the vital role of civil society and minorities themselves in detecting the early signs of violence, alerting national and international bodies, taking initiatives to counter violence and working in post conflict scenarios to prevent violence from reoccurring. Civil society has been essential in bringing issues of national concern to the attention of regional bodies and the United Nations. The tireless work of these committed women and men is commendable and yet, too often their information is neglected or rejected by the State in question and does not lead to action or further investigation.

Let me be clear: there is no magic formula to easily put an end to violence against minorities. Much needs to be done in order to adequately prevent and address violence and those efforts involve all stakeholders, including the international community, the UN, regional organizations, governments, civil

society and individuals. All of us have a responsibility we must fulfill and we must intensify our collective efforts to prevent and bring an end to violence wherever it exists.

Since its inception, this Forum has benefitted greatly from the participation of many governmental and non-governmental actors, minority representatives, and other experts in the field of minority rights, including young people and women from all regions. There is no more important issue than the one that you have before you today at this session – to prevent violence and atrocity crimes targeted at minorities. It is a unique opportunity to hear all of your voices, for discussion of these issues and for the elaboration of important recommendations that can make a real contribution to our collective efforts. I once again thank you, welcome you all and wish you a fruitful and enriching Forum session over the coming days.

Thank you.