



**UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**



UNITED NATIONS FORUM ON MINORITY ISSUES

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Draft Opening remarks by Ms. Kyung-wha Kang

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General Introduction

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, it is an honour for me to open the second session of the Forum on Minority Issues.

At the outset, I would like to congratulate Ms Barbara Lee on her appointment as the Chairperson of the 2nd session of the Forum. Your task is challenging but extremely important. The Forum provides a unique venue for promoting dialogue and cooperation with a view to support the implementation of minority rights, in line with the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. It also makes an important contribution to the work of the Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Ms. Gay McDougall, who guides the work of the Forum.

I would like to congratulate the Independent Expert on her proposal to focus the work of this second session on "Minorities and Effective Political Participation". The theme is of crucial importance to minorities – effective participation it is not only an important

human rights principle in itself but also a *sine qua non* for the implementation of other human rights.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

I am pleased to see so many interested actors gathered here today. Through your participation, you are all helping the Forum to promote effective policies and strategies aimed at securing more effective political participation by persons belonging to minorities. The Forum will benefit from the substantive expertise of very distinguished experts who will be addressing various aspects of the theme under discussion.

The work of the Forum and the Independent Expert is guided by the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. The Declaration constitutes a key document of reference for the protection of minorities. It reaffirms the right of persons belonging to minorities to enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with the principles of non-discrimination and equality before the law. It contains central guarantees to ensure that cultures, languages and other elements of the identity of persons belonging to minorities are protected and promoted, including through the implementation of the right to effective participation.

The exclusion of minorities from effective participation in decision-making is often rooted in violations of the principles of equality and non-discrimination. These principles are a cornerstone of the United Nations and they are embedded in the nine core international human rights instruments. In fact, the entire human rights structure of the UN rests on the premise of equality and non-discrimination, which are inseparable components of the implementation of all rights. The importance of combating discrimination is fully recognised by the High Commissioner, and it is one of the thematic priorities of the Office, including in 2010 - 2011.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

Virtually all countries of the world have minorities. Some of them are numerically small, but it is estimated that two thirds of all countries have very sizable minorities and include at least one substantial minority, ethnic or religious group that makes up at least 10% of the population.

Such diversity is often rightly viewed as a strength -- and there are many examples of harmonious and prosperous coexistence of different communities. There are some significant examples of minority representatives gaining a true voice in decision-making, and we have a number of examples of that in this room today. However, all too often, diversity is wrongly viewed as a risk to the communal cohesion of a State. Sadly, in many countries, failure to value and respect diversity has led to the erosion of the rights of persons belonging to minorities, often involving their exclusion from effective participation. Such exclusion negates the realization of all human rights and can lead to tensions and conflicts. Indeed, ensuring effective minority participation is not only a human rights imperative but also a conflict prevention tool -- since it is through effective participation that a person can secure a stake in society and gain confidence and trust in its institutions.

We have achieved valuable standard-setting and institutional progress in minority protection at the UN and other fora, such as the adoption of the Declaration and the creation of the mandate of the Independent Expert and that of the Forum. All of these have created great expectations. Yet, findings of the Independent Expert, human rights treaty bodies and reports from minorities and NGOs show that there is no room for complacency and that much work lies ahead to move the minority standards from paper to practice and to create the conditions for the effective participation of minorities.

Member States bear the primary responsibility to ensure the implementation of the right to effective participation, and this may require special positive measures aimed at accelerating participation in various areas of life, including in political processes. But success in this area requires input and commitment from all actors. This session of the

Forum offers a unique opportunity for all stakeholders, including Member States, representatives of civil society, the United Nations and other international and regional organizations to share experiences and to promote good practices. Such dialogue is essential as there are no easy answers or one-size-fits-all solutions in this area.

The right to effective political participation can entail specific mechanisms in governmental bodies and in decentralized and local forms of government, and it can in some cases be achieved through cultural or territorial autonomy arrangements. While there are many legitimate options, we must ensure that the approach chosen results in *effective* minority participation.

By bringing together different actors from within and outside the United Nations system, the Forum will be able to provide valuable guidance not only to the work of the Independent Expert on Minority Issues but also for actors at international, regional and national levels.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

Allow me to reaffirm once more our Office's continuous commitment to minority rights. The substantive input we provide to the work of the Forum on Minority Issues is intended, *inter alia*, to support enhanced minority engagement with relevant UN bodies. In addition to supporting the important work of this Forum, we are committed to stepping up our awareness-raising and training activities on the implementation of the Declaration with the view to advance a better understanding of its contents and provide a critical overview as to its current use in various contexts.

In addition to advancing the Declaration as such, we are pursuing focused activities on key themes, For example, our regional consultations on Good Practices in Policing and Minority Communities offers an opportunity to share and collect experiences while focusing on practices that have proven to be successful. The OHCHR Minorities Fellowship Programme is an important activity of the Office as it serves to build capacity

of minority fellows through training on the UN human rights machinery and the mechanisms dealing with minority rights issues in particular, and I should like to welcome the presence of a number of former and current fellows in this forum.

Through the leading role the OHCHR plays in the Inter-Agency Group on Minorities, we foster international cooperation on minority issues between the UN agencies in order to ensure that we all contribute, in coordination and cooperation, to the realization of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

Your discussions over the next two days will contribute to consolidate our common efforts towards the protection of minorities all over the world. On behalf of the High Commissioner and her Office, I would like to wish you a fruitful meeting and assure you of our continuing support and partnership.