

## **Mots d'ouverture, lundi 2 mai 2022**

Thank you Anna-Maria. Terimah kasih. Shokran.

Ms Veliko, Regional Representative of the OHCHR South East Asia, Mr Sensi, Regional Representative of the OHCHR Pacific region, M. Aoyagi, Director at UNESCO Bangkok, Ambassador Baghli, Permanent Observer of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation Delegation in Geneva, distinguished state representatives and colleagues, minority representatives, experts and participants.

Welcome to the 4th Asia-Pacific Regional Forum on the human rights of minorities. I will say a few words at this opening session as the Special Rapporteur on minority issues who has established these regional gatherings around the world, most of which have unfortunately been online because of the pandemic in the last 2 years. All the regional forums have been made possible because of the coordination and continuous support and efforts of the Tom Lantos Institute and numerous volunteers and partner

organisations working in the areas of human rights and minorities which are listed in the forum's programme.

The four 2022 regional forum on minorities will mark this year the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities in 1992.

It is important to acknowledge the context which 30 years ago led to this Declaration because there were around the world dramatic upheavals in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Conflicts including the breakup of Yugoslavia and the fall of the Soviet Union, with numerous conflicts in Asia and Africa during this time mainly competing majoritarian nationalism and grievance claims from ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities.

Just like today, it was a particularly dark period, a dark period which ensured significant and political and intellectual efforts to address. This is the context which led to the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Minorities, at a time when peace and stability was very closely connected to justice.

What is therefore perhaps not appreciated therefore is that this was a period internationally when it was acknowledged through these never before seen legal and political steps to ensure peace and stability through justice and steps for the protection of minorities, and their rights – a promise of respect for human rights by developing instruments to make this promise a reality on the ground – and to see to achieve peace and stability through protecting at least symbolically minorities.

Many of you perhaps recall this period of optimism, and that we were perhaps naïve to think that these promises, because the efforts then were more in the nature of promises and commitments, of more detailed and absolutely necessary and welcome standards which were being made solemnly, but not backed up with very solid enforcement mechanisms.

The UN Declaration as you all know is not a legal instrument, it is more in the nature of a political statement of commitments. It does not create directly legal obligations in international human rights law.

The last 30 years, and particularly more recently, have not always been generous to minorities. If I were to simplify and summarise how minority issues are being dealt around the world right now, I would go so far as to say that what we are dealing with currently is not stability, nor even stagnation, but regression.

Minorities themselves are frustrated that so-called 'rights' can be so easily ignored or dismissed. The cavalier way these promised commitments are being dealt with is contributing to a loss of faith in the goodwill or effectiveness of regional mechanisms that were supposed to protect minorities, their cultures, their languages, in short their identities.

From a global perspective, it must be said that there is also in some countries an impression of growing hostility or at least intolerance towards the cultures, languages or religions of minorities which is exemplified by the growing limitations to, and even fairly outright prohibition of, teaching in minority languages in public schools.

We are also seeing in recent years a dramatic increase, what the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called a tsunami of hate speech in social media targeting mainly, overwhelmingly minorities,

and an increase in violent attacks and hate crimes against minorities in Asia but also in places such as Europe and the Americas.

Social media platforms have become propaganda megaphones, and now amplify intolerance and prejudice to spew propaganda of hate and racism reaching almost immediately huge numbers, thousands and even millions, of people causing real harm, literally leading to individuals around the world being vilified, pointed out, lined up, even killed because they belong to dehumanised others, usually, overwhelmingly targeted minorities. The data available in some countries where there is reliable data suggest that more than three quarters of hate crimes are aimed at minorities, and it seems that it is around the same proportion when we talk of who are those mainly targeted by hate speech.

We're also seeing an instrumentalizing of prejudices and scapegoating of minorities, of incitement to discrimination against minorities by populist politicians for their own short term electoral gains. It seems we have forgotten that the Holocaust did not start with gas chambers, it started with hate speech against a minority, the Jewish minority but also the Roma minority.

Minorities are being demonized as never before since the end of the Second World War in ways that are real-world threats to justice and peace as never before.

In recent decades conflicts overwhelmingly are internal, intrastate conflicts usually with an ethnic or religious dimension according to data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and the Minorities at Risk Program in the United States. Since 2010, the number of major violent conflicts has tripled globally, let me repeat that, tripled, and much of the increase is in the rise of intrastate conflicts, and usually involving minorities, according to the World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020–2025. “There are now more violent conflicts globally than at any time in the past 30 years, and the world is also facing the largest forced displacement crisis ever recorded”.

The world has indeed become a nastier, darker place, and it would be naïve to say that the instruments we currently have in place, and especially the absence of effective mechanisms for their enforcement, are sufficient to address the threatening clouds and growing storm signs we are seeing all around us.

The 'us' versus 'the others' paradigm, mixed in with feelings of injustice combined with perceived discrimination, are reemerging even more strongly as potent factors of division rather than inclusion in many societies. Majoritarian nationalism and its darker, exclusionary elements are returning, as are tensions in different parts of Asia other parts of the world, and the instrumentalization of minority grievances for political gains.

Tensions are rising again in places where minority issues have perhaps never completely been resolved such as China, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, not to mention recent and current wars in the complex contexts in places you all know as the Ukraine which is very much in the headlines these days.

It's not all doom and gloom however, because there are good practices, what could be called shining beacons of light in Asia and the Pacific. While no government is perfect, there have been initiatives and practices in countries such as Singapore, Nepal, Mauritius and others for minorities and indigenous peoples which should be better known and highlighted, and learned from their positive aspects and effects.

This regional forum centred on the second 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Minorities is therefore a response to the reconfiguration of the international order following the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and in other parts of the world when ‘the fate of minorities’ was at stake. The anniversary at the UN is therefore a key opportunity to take stock of the state of minority rights protection, to identify gaps in the minority protection regime, and to assess how such gaps fuel threats to minorities and the protection of their rights, and to make recommendations on the ways forward. This is a historical opportunity to seize because the human rights of minorities, let me say this very clearly, are today, perhaps even more so than 30 years ago, less well acknowledged and protected than most other human rights.

As has often been said, it is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light.

The challenges are immense and urgent to strengthen to concrete obligations what until now has mainly been cultural and linguistic promises – promises that are often ignored or set aside when it’s not convenient to respect.

It is time to ‘Review, Rethink, Reform’ the global recognition, protection and promotion of the rights of minorities for a secure life in a diverse and just world and putting these noble principles into practice by recognising as the first words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaim, “the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

As some of you know, my mandate has also issued, in connection with the need to take stock of how the rights of minorities are dealt as part of the reflection during this 30<sup>th</sup> year of the UN Declaration a call for submissions on the place of the human rights of minorities in the institutions, structures and initiatives of the United Nations.

I have invited individuals, organisations, states and other stakeholders to send their reports, views and comments to consider how the United Nations itself has integrated and mainstreamed the aspirations and promotion of the human rights of minorities in its structures and initiatives, and how it has contributed to the recognition, promotion and protection of the rights of minorities. The report will consider critically how the rights of minorities

figure in developments since the adoption of the UN Declaration in 1992, and how the United Nations has referred to and incorporated - or not - these rights in more recent initiatives in terms of programmes, new treaties and guidelines including in regional and national offices.

In other words, you are invited to comment and share with me the extent to which you consider the rights of minorities are visible and integrated in the priorities and initiatives of the United Nations, as well as mainstreamed in its activities and offices, including at the regional and local levels if they are at all, the evolution of the treatment of minorities in the UN in the last 30 years, and how to ensure a stronger visibility and commitment to the promotion and protection of the rights of minorities in the UN. I will be preparing a report to the United Nations General Assembly in New York next October, and submissions will play an important role in the assessment of how the rights of minorities can be better mainstreamed and dealt with at the United Nations.

The time has come for a reboot – to pivot and focus more on new policies, initiatives and programmes and changes on making the

promises, the commitments from the 1990s a reality on the ground.

Please allow me to make a few observations on the importance on your discussions and insights for the next two days. Different regions have very different contexts and conditions, and the UN Forum on Minority Issues held every year over a day and at half in Geneva at the end of the year has limited time and space to clearly here about the specific challenges facing minorities in every region of the world. Holding regional forums under my mandate allows for us to take into account and hear much more loudly and in-depth the voices and expertise of regional minorities and take them into account when submitting recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council, as we'll explain further later.

I cannot sufficiently emphasise the importance of this forum for the region in order to better understand and appreciate the variety and richness of your contexts, but also and perhaps even more importantly to provide a more accessible opportunity to express yourselves and share your knowledge and insights with my United

Nations mandate. I believe I am also the first and perhaps even still the only rapporteur who has regular regional meetings of this kind.

But more immediately today and tomorrow, we hope you'll be able to draft precise and appropriate recommendations on the themes which you will be exploring shortly, recommendations that reflect your contexts and challenges and which deal first and foremost on how we can move forward in better recognition, protecting and putting into place the rights of minorities in Asia and the Pacific.

May I remind you that only those recommendations which deal with the regional forums themes will be retained. Please be aware that discussions or recommendations that do not address specifically the theme of the anniversary of the UN Declaration and how to strengthen and improve on it run the risk of not being retained. Every year the regional forums coordinated through the Tom Lantos Institute and regional partners and the UN Forum on Minority Issues in Geneva address specific issues, and it is with the issues being considered which will be retaining our focus and attention. It is not possible to deal in two short days all of the minority issues experienced by every single minority group everywhere in Asia, the Pacific or elsewhere in the world.

The recommendations which will emanate from this regional forum process will then be formatted and summarised and made available for the deliberations of the UN Forum on Minority this December in Geneva. They will also be added as an annexe to my annual report to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2023, and published on the website of my UN mandate.

I will now give the floor to the chair, Mme Biro, of the Tom Lantos Institute who will explain the rules of proceedings for the regional forum and summarise the process.

Terimah kasih, shokran. Merci.

Anna-Maria, the floor is yours.