**On the occasion of the Opening of the Asia- Pacific Regional Forum on Hate Speech, Social Media and Minorities**

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My colleague, Cynthia, OHCHR Regional Representative for South-East Asia,

Distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It is my great pleasure to deliver the keynote speech at the Opening of the Asia- Pacific Regional Forum on Hate Speech, Social Media and Minorities.
2. In this keynote I would like briefly to touch upon how UNESCO perceives the hate speech, its implications to our society and how to address it with particular attention to minority groups.
3. UNESCO’s mandate for peace and human rights was born 75 years ago in response to the tragedic world war II. The Preamble to our Constitution declares that since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed. UNESCO, like other UN organizations, has been working to create the opportunities and conditions for dialogue among countries, civilizations, cultures and peoples based upon respect for shared values.
4. Peace is not just the absence of violence. Positive peace is the presence of justice and equality in our societies, in which we not only tolerate each other, but empathize, support and celebrate our differences as expressions of our common humanity. We know that we can build positive peace through education and better mutual understanding.
5. However, today the foundations of peace are still shaky. In many parts of the world, the violence of racism, discrimination and conflict remains commonplace, often plaguing minorities and most vulnerable groups.
6. The reasons are many and complex, but the lack of effective communications between nations and communities, and hate speech prevalent on the internet significantly contribute to sow the ground for tension and conflicts. Social networking platforms constitute an anonymous, wide-reaching and relatively inexpensive public space capable of replicating and radicalizing conflicts.
7. The COVID infodemic is the latest situation where hate speech has again spread at an accelerated pace through social media. This includes xenophobic sentiments spread from the internet to the streets, and sometimes anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim attacks related to the COVID. We found cases that minorities including immigrants and refugees have been stigmatized as sources of the virus, then blocked from access to proper treatment. Online incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence against those perceived as “others”, mainly members of minorities, regularly reminds us that the mission to eliminate hatred, prejudice and misunderstanding is far from being achieved.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. The Asia-Pacific region is home to more than 4 billion people sharing diverse histories, cultures and values. From geopolitical rivalries to migration crisis and tension in border areas, the region faces real danger of ethno-religious nationalism and radicalization.
2. Across the region, the cultural diversity that should be a fundamental strength has also resulted in long-standing tension in terms of religions, ethnicities and languages. The advent of smartphones has been widely welcomed, especially in rural communities that have suffered from information deprivation. Unfortunately, the use of social media has become widespread extremely fast, even before people fully understand the key notions of “living together”. We need tolerance, empathy and cultural diversity.
3. Throughout Asia and the Pacific, the number of active social media users accounts for over 40% of the total population[[1]](#footnote-1). Some media in the region worsen hostility between communities and nationalities by reinforcing national propaganda and stereotypes, emphasizing conflicts and tension, or report in a biased way. This is precisely the environment in which hate speech can flourish. To prevent undermining our long-term efforts for development and peace building, it is urgent to promote intercultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence within societies through every channel including social media.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. UNESCO was created from the belief that peace must be established on the basis of humanity’s moral and intellectual solidarity. UNESCO defends and promotes the position that freedom of expression, whether it is online or offline, as well as the free flow of information should always be the norm. Self-regulatory mechanisms should be considered as the first line of defence against hate speech.
2. I would like to share with you some of our attempts that we have recently recognized as effective to address hate speech and disinformation.
3. Firstly, in Myanmar, UNESCO and UNDP are working together with the Election Commission and the Ministry of Information to counter hate speech and disinformation while promoting peaceful and credible elections in coming November. The project also supports setting up a multi-stakeholder platform to lead a nationally owned movement that can be sustained beyond the elections. This movement will bring together a variety of key national actors such as media and social influencers to set the strategic direction to promote diversity, inclusivity and non-discrimination.
4. Secondly, UNESCO regards Media and Information Literacy as one of the pillars to protect people from being manipulated, and meanwhile maximize the benefits of freedom of expression and information in the long term. For more than 20 years, UNESCO has been promoting Media and Information Literacy in formal, non-formal and informal education by training teachers all over the world. These programmes have been traditionally designed to enhance people’s knowledge about media and information, but recently the issues of prevention of violence, discrimination and conflict have been added into the Media and Information Literacy curriculum, in which the development of critical thinking is one of the major components.
5. Younger generations are the particular target of this education because more than 60% of Facebook users in our region today are between the ages of 18 to 34[[2]](#footnote-2). UNESCO’s project ‘Together 4 Peace’ is also committed to engaging youth groups in regional dialogues, social media campaigns, university seminars and art exhibitions. Youth who are thinking critically are equipped to **identify** propaganda and content promoting violence and **foster** peaceful mindsets and an appreciation of diversity among cultures and countries. This is building positive peace now and for future generations.
6. Lastly, promoting professional journalism and safety of journalists is essential in tackling hate speech. UNESCO study shows that in an ever-growing number of countries, journalists have become victims of online hatred that threatens their ability to report news and information[[3]](#footnote-3). Every year we observe memorial days such as the World Press Freedom Day and the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists to promote the safety of journalists.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. This year, the rise of hate speech and disinformation targeting minorities in relation to COVID reminds us again that peace is fragile. Positive peace requires a human rights approach founded in social and economic justice, our relationship with the natural environment and addressing the climate crisis, and working together to overcome inequalities.
2. We need continuous commitment from UN entities, Member States, national human rights institutions, NGOs, minority representatives, and internet and social media companies to discuss best practices, set strategic direction and lead actions against hate speech.
3. In conclusion, I would like reiterate the following three points to be reflected on in your discussion today and tomorrow.
4. Hate speech is a serious attack on positive peace, which embraces justice, equality, tolerance, cultural diversity and our shared common values.
5. To address hate speech, we have to understand the root causes of hatred that stem from complex and mixed emotions and mind-sets, such as ignorance, fear, a false sense of predominance, marginalization, discrimination and exclusion.
6. In building resilience against hate speech, we must build in our own minds appreciation for diversity, justice and equality for all. We must uphold the right to freedom of expression and address the root causes of hate speech through education, science and culture.
7. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address you today and wish the forum a great success. Thank you very much!

1. See ‘social media use’, p. 30, DIGITAL 2017: ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL OVERVIEW (https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2017-apac-regional-overview) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See ‘Profile of APAC’s Facebook users’, p. 35, DIGITAL 2017: ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL OVERVIEW (https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2017-apac-regional-overview) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See https://en.unesco.org/world-media-trends [↑](#footnote-ref-3)