**Opening remarks Monday 19 October**

Thank you Anna Maria.

Excellencies, Madame Veliko, OHCHR Regional Representative for Southeast Asia, Mister Aoyagi, Director of UNESCO Bangkok, Ambassador Bourane, Director for Muslim Communities and Minorities at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Madame Kangmun, Director-General of the Anti-Discrimination Bureau, National Human Rights Commission of Korea, Madame Pongsapich, Commissioner of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, distinguished state representatives, experts and participants, ladies and gentlemen.

Bonjour, Good morning, Good afternoon and good evening to all of you who have joined this exciting second Regional Forum for Asia-Pacific on the theme of Hate Speech, Social Media and Minorities, and first online regional forum. Before I begin, please allow me to express my gratitude to the Tom Lantos Institute and to the other partners in the region such as IMADR, the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism of Japan, the Human Rights and Peace Studies Programme at Mahidol University in Thailand for supporting this regional forum which, like many others, has faced many challenges because of the pandemic disruptions we have all been experiencing worldwide. Many others have made this event possible, and I will be thanking them more formally at the end of the forum tomorrow.

Ladies and gentlemen.

I announced in my first report to the UN General Assembly in 2017 that hate speech, social media and minorities was one of the four thematic priorities of my new mandate. At the 2018 UN Forum on Minority Issues (Forum) in Geneva, I also announced that regional forums would be organised from 2019 to make the UN Forum more accessible and responsive to regional contexts and realities. Last year we held three regional forums for Africa, Asia and Europe on the issue of education, language and minorities. This year, the pandemic has meant that we can only hold 2 of the 4 expected regional forums we were hoping for on one of greatest challenges the world is currently facing: the virus of the mind which is infecting millions of people and poisoning societies with misinformation, disinformation, and hate – and which we still seem to be unable to halt or even slow down to any significant degree. As the concept note for this regional forum points out, it seems the main targets of hate speech everywhere in the region are minorities: Amnesty International India’s interactive website ‘Halt the Hate’ for example found that between September 2015 and June 2019 more than 93% of hate crimes involved a small number of specific minorities, Muslim, Dalit, Adivasi, and Christians, with 864 out of 927 reported incidents. In Australia, the 2018 Report on Anti-Semitism in Australia reported an unprecedented 60 per cent rise of incidents across the country.

Last year, UN Secretary-General António Guterres when announcing the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech warned us that around the world we’re seeing a disturbing groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance – including rising anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred and persecution of Christians. Social media and other forms of communication are being exploited as platforms for bigotry. Public discourse is being weaponized for political gain with incendiary rhetoric that stigmatizes and dehumanizes minorities, migrants, refugees, women and any so called “other”. Intolerance and stereotypes are being amplified, and even to some extent in some countries normalized.

Minority women can be doubly targeted for some of the most vile and violent hate through social media as has been mentioned on a few occasions.

Just as the pandemic does not affect everyone the same, hate speech does not target everyone to the same degree in society: data from other Asian and Pacific countries, where available, show that national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities are the main targets of hate speech.

Let me absolutely clear here: it is not accurate to say that minorities are ‘often’ the target of hate speech. They are the targets most of the time, not just often or sometimes.

And hate speech against minorities unfortunately is too often followed by hate crimes and violence. We have seen it in recently increased attacks on Dalits in South Asia and other minorities, including as you have heard with the rape of Dalit women and the murder of individuals just because they are members of minorities – and the victims of racism. This occurs in many parts of the world, including in the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar. To put it bluntly, the dehumanitisation and scapegoating of minorities can prepare the ground for crimes against humanity and even what has been characterised as attempted genocide. These are some of the concrete consequences of hate speech in social media when it targets minorities. One of the main questions you should be asking is whether what we have in place is working? And the answer is clear that not enough is being done since there right now disturbingly increasing calls to not only violence, but even genocide.

That’s where we’re at. The targets of hate speech are almost always minorities, but not all governments nor social media platform owners collect disaggregated data on hate speech so that this is not always as clear as it should be. This is an issue which needs to be raised with governments, human rights organisations and social media owners and platforms: if you are serious about tackling hate speech, what are your systems in place but more critically where is the data to identify those who are vulnerable and the main victims of hate speech so that they can be best protected.

This needs to be raised, it needs to be emphasised and it needs to be explicitly acknowledged. Any toolbox of measures to address hate speech must include tools to address specifically where most cases of hate speech are encountered: and that is against minorities. Unfortunately, most of the initiatives that are in place, including those that we have heard about earlier, are not aimed at or designed to deal with most cases of hate speech that are occurring everywhere in the world – it seems that most are not designed with minorities in mind. The root causes of hate speech are not addressed if initiatives and programmes to combat hate speech omit or do not include specific measures for minorities.

The virus of hate will not disappear by itself. Its spread must be prevented, the virus itself must be tackled where and when it can be addressed – whilst respecting the requirements of freedom of expression as recognised in United Nations legally binding treaties. We must recognise the nature of the beast if we are to be able to resist and control it, and that the main victims are minorities. I note with interest in this regard initiatives such as the Rabat Plan of Action which I believe will be discussed during this regional forum.

We also have to ask hard questions: is it enough to mainly call on social media companies to do more than flag or remove racist, misogynist and other harmful content? Should they also be held financially liable in some cases, as can be traditional printed media? What are the particular contexts and specific nature of hate speech in Asian and Pacific countries? Is this sufficiently reflected in available disaggregated data, or does it hide or camouflage the extent of hate speech against Dalits, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Uighurs and other minorities? Are all institutions working on hate speech in social media identifying who are the targets, and especially the main minority targets? How is this being addressed.

Finally, part of the exercise of regional forums such as this one is also to hear the voices and learn of the experiences and expertise in different parts of the world, which is not always the case when we hold events of only a few days in Geneva. As will be explained to you at various points, it is hoped you will be able to make recommendations as to how we can address the scourge of hate speech targeting minorities in the Asia-Pacific region which takes into account your specific challenges, contexts and social settings, so that these can be taken made public and taken into account at the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues to be held online on November 19 and 20, and also be integrated in my own annual report to be presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council in June next year.

Furthermore, it is hoped that as part of my mandate it will be possible to prepare and present at the United Nations practical guidelines on how to address directly to prevent hate speech and protect the human rights of minorities in the face of an onslaught of hate and even violence which is finding fertile grounds in social media.

This is what you are invited to reflect on. We’ll now be explaining the process and expectations for this regional forum shortly, and I remind you of the specific objectives for this event as outlined in the concept note.

Terimah kasih, shokran, shoukria, xie xie, domo arigato, thank you and I wish you all successful deliberations.