

## **FORUM ON MINORITY ISSUES SIXTH SESSION**

### **"Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities"**

**26 and 27 November 2013  
Room XX, Palais des Nations, Geneva**

#### **SUMMARY BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE FORUM**

#### **Ms Hedina Sijerčić**

Pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 19/23 of 23 March 2012, the Forum on Minority Issues continues to provide a platform for promoting dialogue and cooperation on issues pertaining to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, as well as thematic contributions and expertise to the work of the Independent Expert on minority issues. The Forum identifies and analyzes best practices, challenges, opportunities and initiatives for the further implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (hereinafter referred to as "the Declaration").

The Forum meets annually for two working days allocated to thematic discussions. The Independent Expert on minority issues, Ms. Rita Izsák, is responsible for guiding the work of the Forum, preparing its annual meetings and reporting on its thematic recommendations to the Human Rights Council.

The sixth session of the Forum took place on 26 and 27 November 2013 in Room XX of the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. Ms. Hedina Sijerčić was appointed as Chair of the sixth session of the Forum that focussed on **"Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities"**.

Over 500 participants took part in this sixth session of the Forum, including United Nations Member States and specialized agencies, intergovernmental and regional organizations, human rights treaty bodies, national human rights institutions, academics and experts as well as civil society actors working on minority issues<sup>1</sup>. In addition to this wide range of stakeholders, this session brought together persons belonging to religious minorities who are actively engaged in minority rights advocacy and diverse areas of work related to the protection and promotion of the rights of religious minorities.

A note by the Independent Expert on minority issues, Ms Rita Izsák, on guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities and a set of draft recommendations was made available to all Forum participants in advance of the Forum, and formed the basis for the discussions<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The list of the organizations and delegations that participated in the Forum is available on the website of the Forum on Minority Issues: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Minority/Pages/Session6.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> See A/HRC/FMI/2013/2 and A/HRC/FMI/2013/3 available on the Forum's website.

## **Format of the Forum**

The Forum followed the procedure that has been developed over its previous sessions. To help focus the discussions and ensure that they would be highly inter-active, each agenda item was introduced by a few pre-determined presentations before the Forum would hear interventions from other participants, based on a sign-up sheet.

## **Outcome documents**

The present document is prepared in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 19/23 which requests the Chair to prepare “a summary of the discussion of the Forum, to be made available to all participants of the Forum”. This summary is to be complemented by the outcome document containing the recommendations of the Forum that will be presented by the Independent Expert on minority issues to the Human Rights Council at its 25<sup>th</sup> Regular Session in March 2014.

This summary does not provide the full details of all presentations that were made during the Forum’s proceedings. The consolidated list of speakers and, where available, the full text of their presentations can be found on the Forum’s website at the following address: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Minority/Pages/Session6.aspx>

## **Item I. Opening meeting**

**The Vice-President of the Human Rights Council, H.E. Ambassador Ms Iruthisham Adam, welcomed all participants on behalf of the President of the Council.** She emphasized the high relevance of the issues discussed during this session of the Forum to the work of the Council, referring to different resolutions to this effect, including resolution 22/20 of March 2013 renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and recent resolutions on “*Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief*”. She indicated that the Human Rights Council was looking forward to the recommendations of this session to be presented by the Independent Expert on minority issues at its 25<sup>th</sup> session in March 2014.

**The Chief of the OHCHR Special Procedures Branch, Ms Jane Connors, welcomed all participants on behalf of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.** She stressed that this Forum had contributed to greatly expanding the knowledge and understanding of the UN human rights system about the challenges facing minorities. She pointed to the key role played by UN mandate holders such as the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the Independent Expert on minority issues who are at the forefront of efforts to promote and protect the rights of religious minorities. Referring to the important work conducted within the UN system in this regard, she gave as a positive example OHCHR’s involvement in the consultative process that resulted in the Rabat Plan of Action. She stressed that it is through sustained engagement with national authorities that international standards and recommendations from human rights mechanisms such as this Forum can best be implemented.

**The Independent Expert on minority issues, Ms Rita Izsák,** reminded all participants that the rights and security of religious minorities was among her thematic priorities as addressed for example in her recent report to the General Assembly in which she advocated for a minority rights-based approach to the protection of religious minorities. She indicated that protection and promotion of the full range of minority rights, together with initiatives to foster dialogue between faith groups, helps to build a culture of understanding, acceptance and trust across faiths and to prevent tensions from emerging and deteriorating into violence and conflict. She then focused on two areas that required particular attention during the Forum: the rising tide of violent attacks against religious minorities and the need for dialogue and inter-faith exchanges.

**The Chair of the sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues, Ms Hedina Sijerčić** stressed that her personal background living in different countries had led her to experience first-hand the multiple forms of discrimination faced by women belonging to minorities. She underlined that, regrettably, cultural differences, including religious and linguistic differences, can still serve to segregate people including youth and educational institutions. For this Forum and its recommendations to have an impact on the ground and in the lives of persons belonging to minorities, she stressed that it is not only crucial to ensure the active participation of minority representatives from all regions and backgrounds in its sessions but also for the diversity of opinions and of situations within all groups to be heard and reflected in the recommendations. The Chair explained the format of the discussions and encouraged all participants to show respect for others' views while inviting them to exercise decorum.

**The United Nations Special Adviser on the prevention of Genocide, Mr Adama Dieng** focused his remarks on the link between the prevention of atrocity crimes and the protection of religious rights for minorities, specifically highlighting how the concept of the responsibility to protect applies and enhances the protection of minorities. Following a short overview of applicable standards, including the Declaration, he underlined the connection between the protection of minority rights and the prevention of conflicts. He however mentioned that atrocity crimes can also happen in a non-conflict situation especially where minorities are persecuted on religious or ethnic grounds. He emphasized the role of minority rights' protection and dedicated minority rights mechanisms in promoting social stability and cohesion. In this regard, he underlined that, while States bear the primary responsibility for the protection of minorities within their territory, other actors, including the civil society, community and religious leaders as well as the media, also have a shared responsibility in this regard.

## **Item II. Legal framework and key concepts**

*This session provided an overview of existing international and regional standards and principles relating to the rights of religious minorities, including the Declaration. Applicable standards and principles providing for the right to freedom of religion or belief were addressed. Participants further discussed how to ensure that international*

*standards relating to the protection of the rights of religious minorities are reflected in national legislation, policies and practices.*

**Ms Nazila Ghanea, presented on “*Religious minorities and the question of responsibilities*”** indicating that the rights of religious minorities were initially primarily upheld through multilateral and bilateral treaties and it was only in 1945 that the UN was formed and the UN Charter adopted international human rights as one of its very objectives. She stated that, though religious minorities found specific mention in article 27 of the ICCPR and the Declaration, their rights were never fully incorporated within the minority rights mechanisms until recently as they had been dealt with under freedom of religion or belief standards. She stressed that persons belonging to religious minorities should not only fully enjoy freedom of religion or belief but also have full access to all human rights including minority rights. She expressed the hope that the Forum would go beyond the ‘victimhood’ of religious minorities and recognize their power to stand up for their own rights and the rights of others but also to use all their resources to contribute to wider society.

**Mr Brian J. Grim, presenting on “*The Connection between Government Policies and Social Hostilities toward Minorities*”.** He stated that a rising tide of restrictions on religion has swept the globe in the past years and demonstrated this by different facts and figures. For example, he indicated that 40 per cent of countries today have high or very high restrictions on religion coming from Governments or from the actions of groups in society. The brunt of these restrictions is felt most keenly by religious minorities. In particular, 53% of countries in the world today have Governments that have either displayed violence toward religious minority groups or did not intervene in cases of discrimination or abuses to religious minorities. He highlighted several significant patterns in these data including the fact that when Governments have high overall restrictions on religious freedom, minority groups face even more restrictions. He further demonstrated how all religions face these problems although there are patterns faced by different religions. He also stressed that the abuse of religious minorities happens in every region of the world. On the positive side, he indicated that according to data, when religious freedom is guaranteed and restrictions are low religious minorities fare much better, and that there are many social benefits and higher economic and intellectual innovation in countries characterised by high religious freedom.

**Mr Rodrigo Vitorino Souza Alves, presented on “*The protection of religious minorities in the United Nations and Organization of American States’ systems*”.** He first underlined that the United Nations took a major step with the adoption of the Declaration on Minority Rights, giving a brief overview of the principles enshrined therein and related obligations for States. He then referred to the Inter-American Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination and Intolerance adopted by the Organization of American States in June 2013. This Convention emphasizes that equality, non-discrimination and separation between State laws and religious norms are fundamental for the peaceful coexistence in pluralistic and democratic societies, and that societies must respect the identity of every person, while creating the conditions that will enable its expression, preservation and development. He highlighted that the Declaration

combined with the Anti-Discrimination Convention, once in force, will constitute instruments of counter-majoritarian protection that should inspire and contribute to the development of other regional and national instruments. Secondly, they are transformative instruments, not only of majoritarian groups, but also of minorities, since every person is entitled to, as well as constrained by, universal human rights.

**Mr Mohamed Eltayeb, presented on “Towards a Framework for Guaranteeing the Rights of Religious Minorities: a Quest for Combating Religious Hatred”.** He underlined that most of the countries in the world today are characterised by an increasing national, racial and religious diversity as well as increasingly multicultural societies, hence the importance of developing an effective framework for granting and protecting the rights of religious minorities. Such a framework requires two main aspects: the normative and institutional resources and then the legal, political, social and cultural frameworks in which the normative content should be applied. Three situations should however be distinguished: first is where there is both a strong normative and institutional basis for granting the rights of religious minorities but without success, second is where there are both weak normative and institutional systems and the third situation is where there are strong normative and institutional resources that lead to effectively protecting the rights of minorities. He stressed that the normative and institutional resources can be found in international and regional human rights instruments, the most remarkable one in this respect being the Declaration.

### ***Discussion***

The following issues were raised during the discussion under Item II:

- The significant number of recommendations regarding the rights of religious minorities in the second cycle of the UPR so far;
- The fact that States bear the primary responsibility for setting up a national legal framework in compliance with international human rights standards and the importance of cooperation and sharing of good practices in this regard;
- Religious freedom is a universal human right that all States have responsibility to uphold;
- The importance of recognising the diversity that exists within religious minority groups and the need to take a gender perspective into account in this context;
- The importance of respecting the principle of self-identification of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities;
- The need for States to revoke existing blasphemy and anti-incitement laws because they exacerbate intolerance and provide Governments with the means of suppressing the freedoms of religion and expression;
- The importance of the right to acquire citizenship;
- The right to privacy and freedom of association as vital to religious minorities and the right to conversion as an integral part of freedom of religion or belief;
- The importance of addressing the particular needs of religious minority women;
- The important report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to the General Assembly underlining the positive inter-relatedness of freedom of religion or belief and gender equality;

- How rule of law strategies can be used to promote and protect the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- The Declaration on Minority Rights as a key reference text on the rights of persons belonging to minorities at the global level;
- The recent adoption by the EU Foreign Affairs Council of the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief;
- The three mechanisms of the Council of Europe i.e. the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities and freedom of religion (FCNM) and the ECRML as potentially useful support in the protection of religious minorities;
- The importance for countries to enshrine the protection of religious minorities within their constitutions;
- The importance of education and awareness-raising; and the need to revise schoolbooks to reinforce understanding and respect for the different religions and enhance interest in other people's beliefs;
- The fact that religious affiliations in national identity card should be abolished;
- The significant role that can be played by different actors, such as religious leaders, in promoting the rights of minorities, especially in cases where leaders from the majority faith speak out on behalf of religious minorities in a given country;
- The importance of anti-discrimination legislation at both domestic and international levels;
- The particular challenges facing religious minorities in post-conflict situations and the need to implement affirmative measures to protect their rights in such contexts;
- The importance for countries to conduct census to determine the status of their population, including a comprehensive picture of the social and living conditions of all groups.

### **Item III. Protection of the existence of and prevention of violence against religious minorities**

*This session aimed to identify the measures taken by States and other actors to prevent tensions and acts of aggression or violence against religious minorities, their places of worship and assembly. The situation of religious minorities in conflict and post-conflict settings, and the role of all actors involved in ensuring protection of religious minorities and accountability for violations of their rights were considered. The positive role that religious leaders can play in addressing violations of the rights of religious minorities, preventing further violence and promoting peace and reconciliation, was further examined.*

**Mr Majed El Shafie, presented on “Protecting religious minorities: A human imperative”,** first referring to his personal experience as being relevant to the subject. He indicated that the vast majority of challenges faced by religious minorities fall into three categories: first the threats from secular authoritarian regimes, which monitor, regulate, and control religious practice and expression within their boundaries and suppress any unauthorized practice, second, cases of religious dominance that may involve a state favouring a majority religion while discriminating against minority religions, and the third category often but not necessarily linked to the second, namely the treatment of religious minorities in conflict or post-conflict situations. Rev. El Shafie encouraged

States that have aid and trade ties with States where minorities face threats to connect their aid to measurable improvements in this regard. He further stressed the need to recognize the special needs of converts and called on the Forum to recommend that States pay particular attention to supporting members of religious minorities who are fleeing from conflict zones.

**Ms Salpy Eskidjian, presented on *"Inter-Religious dialogue and the Cyprus Peace Process"*.** She explained how key actors including religious leaders began the process of inter-religious communication for human rights and peace in Cyprus although no one initially believed that religion could play such a positive role in the process. The purpose of the Religious Track has been to build relationship, understanding and trust between the religious leaders and ultimately members of the respective faith communities. Through the Religious Track the religious leaders are trying to ensure that the main concerns of the religious communities are understood and considered in the peace process and formal negotiations as a result of which, there is now inter-religious communication in Cyprus. The Religious Track has proved that when there is an improved climate of inter-religious dialogue, then trust can be built and significant progress can be made. It has proven that religious leaders in a conflict situation can play a positive role in addressing violations of human rights, promoting peace and reconciliation.

**Ms Diane Ala'I presented on *"Involvement, inclusion, expression and protection"*.** She underlined that by creating a space where religious minorities are able to inform others of the tenets of their beliefs, States can contribute to the dispelling of misconceptions and prejudices. She stressed that attacks and violence are often based on suspicion, ignorance and presumptions. Majorities can also have little interest in learning more—which can be fostered by religious leaders as well as politicians, often because they believe these religions and beliefs are threats. She highlighted that by actively contributing to the betterment of society, shoulder to shoulder with other compatriots, members of religious minorities can create confidence-building situations. Moreover, by allowing freedom of expression, the State will provide an environment where healthy debates regarding different beliefs will improve the level of awareness and be conducive to a heightened social tolerance, thus safeguarding minorities from attacks and persecution.

### ***Discussion***

The following issues were raised during the discussion under Item III:

- The important role played by freedom of religion or belief in not only resolving conflict but also in preventing them;
- Prevention as being key in order to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for religious minorities;
- The need for all cases of harassment, intimidation and persecution of religious minorities should to be thoroughly and immediately investigated and punished;
- States should take measures to encourage knowledge of the belief, history, traditions and cultures of the religious minorities within their territory;

- Education and dialogue as some of the most effective tools to help prevent sectarian violence and foster religious tolerance and understanding;
- Different ways by which States can prevent hate crimes and the fact that dissuasive penalties should be in place to prevent incitement to violence or hatred;
- The importance of citizenship rights and their implications on many other rights for religious minorities;
- The importance of a strong constitution providing for the rights of religious minorities;
- Recognition of dignity of every person and of their equal rights as any other citizen to participate in all spheres of life and then implementation of practical steps through education, dialogue and solidarity making coexistence possible;
- The important role played by human rights defenders in raising awareness and protecting religious minorities;
- The need for religious minorities to be able to appoint their own religious leaders, rather than those appointed by the State, to help foster confidence in inter-faith dialogue;
- The lack of recognition of religious minorities as full contributing elements to societies as a root of the problems that they face;
- The importance to ensure that legislation and policies, including anti-terrorism laws, do not arbitrarily target specific religious minorities;
- The key role played by United Nations early warning mechanisms such as the Special Adviser for the prevention of Genocide and the importance for States to collaborate with such mechanisms;
- The importance of implementing the Declaration and other relevant standards and principles for the rights of religious minorities to be protected in practice;
- Issues surrounding conscientious objectors;
- The need to review and amend personal laws to bring them in line with international standards;
- The need to protect places of worship, including in conflict situations;
- The importance of the principle of self-identification for all religious minorities;
- The situation of minorities within minority groups;
- The importance of the legal framework, including of a strong Constitution providing for the legal basis for promoting and protecting the fundamental human rights and freedoms, including minority rights.

#### **Item IV. Promotion and protection of the identity of religious minorities**

*This session was devoted to the identification of effective practices to ensure the protection and promotion of the identity of religious minorities so that they can freely maintain and develop their religious and cultural practices and traditions. The discussion looked into opportunities to protect religious minorities through the promotion and protection of their culture and language, including by taking measures in the field of education. The session also considered the specific challenges that women belonging to religious minorities may face, both within and outside of their religious communities.*



**Prof Heiner Bielefeldt, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, presented on “*The rights of religious minorities*”.** He stressed the need for cooperation between all stakeholders underlining that, while a multilevel approach must be taken, the most significant changes are brought by persons who are on the ground. Prof Bielefeldt also recalled the fact that discrimination against minorities would undermine treatment against majorities. He mentioned that he had been edified by the example given in Sierra Leone, a country that overcame a brutal civil war through an intense intra and inter religious dialogue. He also described the case of Cyprus as a model that shows the possibility to build trust although this implies a long investment. Prof Bielefeldt finally highlighted that minority rights should not be considered as privileges; they are human rights, and they are based on the idea of their universality.

**Mr Sergine Mansour Sy Djamil, Vice-President of the National Assembly of Senegal, presented on “*The rights of non-Muslims in Islam*”.** His presentation aimed at underlining the importance of Islam teachings in order for citizens to know how it advocates for the rights of non-Muslims. He also denounced some examples of what he considered as laws against the right of freedom of religion or belief, especially in Europe. He stressed the important role of the Islamic Development Bank in granting subventions to Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim countries. Mr Sy Djamil finally outlined the example of Senegal as a country where, notwithstanding the fact that 96 per cent of the population is Muslim, it has been led by a Christian president.

**Mr Maung Tun Khin, President of the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, presented on “*The situation of the Rohingya people*”**, a Muslim minority in Myanmar. Mr Tun Khin denounced some human rights abuses from which this group suffers, including in relation to the right to marry and freedom of movement. Moreover, he indicated that human rights activists have been harassed and arrested, while cases of incitement to hatred and violence against the Rohingya were allowed to continue with impunity. He recommended that an independent international investigation is set up to establish the truth and prevent further attacks. In his opinion, an increase in international observers on the ground could help in preventing further attacks and improving the security situation. In addition, he pointed out that, although aid access has improved, there is still not enough aid reaching the people internally displaced by violence.

**Ms Leila El Ali, presented on “*Challenges encountering women belonging to minorities, women’s rights and cultural relativism*”.** She stated that, in the Middle East, the conflict against minorities has recently become more acute. This conflict is closely linked, in one way or another, with international and regional conflicts within the Region and their influences on the Arab revolutions and transitions. The rights of minorities and marginalised groups are being, in her view, disregarded. In this sense, religion or belief would be one of the components of the culture, albeit not the only one. However, it constitutes a key element in what refers to minority self-defence. These groups therefore need laws to protect their religion and other specific features. Ms El Ali gave several examples regarding Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and Libya, and warned that women are in many situations the most vulnerably persons. She suggested strengthening separation between State and religion as well as equality rights between men and women.

## ***Discussion***

The following issues were raised during the first segment of the discussion under Item IV:

- The practice and maintaining of a religion are closely connected with the maintaining of other aspects of culture and traditions;
- The link between discrimination on ethnicity, religion and languages and extreme poverty; the repercussions of such discrimination on land ownership for religious minorities;
- The possibility for some State laws regulating freedom of religion to have a discriminatory and negative impact on religious minorities;
- Tolerance as a key element within minorities' rights and its promotion by the States;
- The effectiveness of existing protection mechanisms needs to be reassessed and enhanced where necessary;
- The fact that religious minorities often belong to different national, ethnic or linguistic groups, and that the protection of their religious freedom should be viewed in the broader context of implementation of the full range of minority rights;
- The positive roles that can be played by religious communities in education and social integration;
- The fact that organizational and financial capabilities of religious groups should be taken into consideration in the Recommendations to ensure appropriate support for them;
- The need to pay special attention to the situation of women belonging to religious minorities as well as to their right to access to education;
- The need for States to take measures to eliminate discriminatory policies;
- The fact that persecution of certain minority groups can lead them to migrate and seek asylum elsewhere.

## **Item V. Promotion of constructive interfaith dialogue, consultation and exchange**

*This session discussed the role that key actors, including religious minorities, religious and community leaders, as well as political actors, can play in the promotion and protection of the rights and security of religious minorities and in promoting tolerance and harmonious relations between faith groups. The role that women can play in fostering intercommunity tolerance and dialogue and promoting the rights of religious minorities was also discussed. Participants identified positive examples of interfaith dialogue and exchange and assessed how existing mechanisms, institutions and processes have been established and work in practice.*

**Mr José Riera presented on “UNHCR’s engagement with faith-based organisations, faith leaders and communities of faith”.** He gave a brief overview of the Dialogue on Faith on Protection hosted in 2012 by the UNHCR, which was in turn inspired by other UN agencies. Through that dialogue, it was possible to verify that all faith communities share core values which contribute to strengthen the protection of refugees, internally

displaced persons, asylum seekers and stateless persons. Moreover, the dialogue was useful to identify examples of good practices of the work of faith-based organisations as well as local faith communities. The second work stream developed specific guidance for faith leaders, encouraging them to welcome migrants and other groups and stand together against intolerance, exclusion and xenophobia. Lastly, UNHCR was seeking guidance on the multiple dimensions of faith in the context of displacement and the way to deal with, reach out to and partner with religious organisation.

**Rev Usman Fornah presented on the “*Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone*”.** He stated that, whereas some religious groups enjoy peaceful co-existence and even collaborate with each other, some others are hostile to this practice. In Sierra Leone, there are two main religions, Christianity and Islam, but African Traditional Religion also serves as the religious basis of the cultures. Religious practices and beliefs are therefore diverse. Some cannot tolerate relationship with people of other religions; others encourage constructive dialogue, consultation and exchange on issues related to socio-political affairs, religious practices and economic life. This exchange is necessary for a peaceful religious co-existence. Thus, the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone was founded to promote peaceful coexistence and collaboration amongst the various religions. This particular form of interfaith collaboration was a novelty in many parts of Africa.

**Ms Carmen Asiaín presented on “*Freedom of conscience and religion as a uniting factor in interfaith dialogues*”.** She talked about a recent experience she has had in Latin American countries with regard to interfaith dialogue during which representatives of all religions – majorities and minorities – had gathered to defend freedom of conscience and, specifically, conscientious objection. She gave some examples in which conscientious objection was denied, such as a Catholic hospital compelled to perform some practices opposed to its basic principles. In Latin America, the current concerns with religious groups do not lie in religious persecution, but in issues related to freedom of conscience, she stated. Parliaments have endorsed several laws – especially some bills including sensitive bioethical contents – without balancing the interests of minority groups. She stressed that majority lawmaker groups should take into account the interests of minority groups as a requirement of democracy.

**Mr Louis Climis presented on “*Minorities in Iraq, victims of religious, sectarian and ethnic conflicts*”** first stating that minorities must benefit from all forms of rights. He indicated that minorities in Iraq suffer due to the mere fact that they are minorities and that some policies might disproportionately affect them. Contrary to the image of a pluralist and multicultural Iraq, Christians are the prime targeted group for discrimination, he stated. He however underlined that civil society organisations are attempting to disseminate a culture of peace and harmony. He also stressed that restrictions have been introduced in the Civil Code. He stressed the need for the Iraqi Constitution to be amended to ensure minority rights.

The following issues were raised during the discussion under Item V:

- The processes of building inclusive societies and enhancing the rights of religious minorities must be inclusive;

- The importance of the right to effective political participation for religious minorities;
- Different measures taken by States aimed at promoting inter-faith dialogues in their countries;
- Examples of best practices that can be useful in considering the rights of religious minorities;
- The need for States to take measures to address extremism and disseminate tolerance and moderation;
- The direct link between respect for the rights of religious minorities and the protection of their freedom of expression and freedom of religion;
- The need to protect religious sites;
- The fact that leader's attitude can obviously help, but it cannot replace the community itself;
- The need for key stakeholders, State and non-State actors, to build an interfaith dialogue based on equality and equity and to strive to create an environment for the enjoyment by all persons of freedom of religion or belief
- The secularity of the State does not imply that there shall not be collaboration among the State and religious groups;
- The need for timely compensation to be provided in case of damages against a religious minority group;
- The need to use religion to unite and not to divide;
- There are several conceptions of religion, which may create tensions that need to be managed, including through addressing misconceptions and misunderstandings;
- The essential role of religious and political leaders in promoting interreligious dialogue, including at the grassroots level.

**Mr Ralston Deffenbaugh provided some concluding remarks,** first stating that the General Assembly recognises the imperative need for dialogue among different faiths and religions and encourages the spread of the messages of interfaith harmony and good will. He stressed that one of the most important ways to engage in interfaith dialogue is in practice; and that religion can be a force for peace. Protecting freedom of religion is a way to achieving peace; therefore, respecting the rights of religious minorities gives the space to those minorities and contributes to the fact that they can express themselves by loving their God and their neighbours. In this way, interfaith dialogue supports peace-building work.

**Ms Hedina Sijerčić, Chairperson of the sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues,** thanked all participants for their engagement and valuable contributions, including comments on the draft recommendations. She underlined that the protection of religious minorities would also enhance the conditions of those linguistic and ethnic minorities. She welcomed the many examples of good practices that were shared by Forum participants in such areas as legislation, institutional attention to minority issues, projects targeted to address the problems facing religious minorities or key concerns, as well as local level initiatives. Ms Sijerčić finally reminded that all the relevant recommendations would be reflected in a document to be presented to the 25<sup>th</sup> regular session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in March 2014.

**Ms Rita Izsák, the United Nations Independent Expert on Minority Issues**, first congratulated the Chair for her work performed then thanked Mr Adama Dieng, the United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and Prof. Heiner Bielefeldt, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. Ms Izsák expressed the wish to enhance the cooperation between these different United Nations mandates. Welcoming the active and positive participation of all stakeholders to this session, she emphasised that there had been a strong message about the need for dialogue and to build bridges of understanding, acceptance and trust. She also stressed the need for better implementation of the Declaration on Minority Rights to guarantee the rights of religious minorities. She highlighted the fact that this Forum and its recommendations only fulfil their potential when they are translated into action on the ground.