

Check against delivery

**Fifth session of the
Forum on Minority Issues**



**Opening Remarks by Ms. Navi Pillay
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**Tuesday, 27 November 2012, 10:00 a.m.
Palais des Nations, Salle XX**

Madam Chair,
Madam President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Colleagues and Friends,

It is a great pleasure for me to join you for the opening of this fifth session of the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues and to welcome you all. I am especially pleased to see so many participants representing minorities from around the world present today. This is your Forum and a unique space within the UN system for dialogue on minority issues, and it is essential that your voices and views are at the heart of this meeting.

I would like to congratulate Soyata Maiga for her appointment as the Chair of this 5th session. We will benefit greatly from your expert guidance and wealth of experience, including in your current position as member of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and as its Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa. I also warmly thank and congratulate the Independent Expert on minority issues, Rita Izsák, for her work in preparing and guiding this Forum, supported by the staff of my Office.

This year we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. The unanimous adoption of the Declaration in 1992 signalled the commitment of UN Member States to reinforce their efforts to protect minorities and to ensure that discrimination against them is combatted decisively, their cultures and identities protected, and that they can participate effectively in all aspects of their societies.

We must acknowledge that despite positive developments, in all regions disadvantaged minorities continue to face challenges and barriers to the full enjoyment of their rights. Implementation of the Declaration is still a work in progress, and the gap between the principles contained in the Declaration and the daily reality of many minorities is often as wide as ever. This anniversary provides us with a timely opportunity to renew the pledge that was made 20 years ago to protect the rights of minorities everywhere.

As States, human rights practitioners and advocates, our commitment is to translate the rights that exist on paper into reality on the ground. Promoting implementation of international human rights standards lies at the very heart of the work of my Office and my staff here in Geneva and in the field. It is timely that the Forum now takes time to examine the diverse ways in which the Declaration has been used and implemented in practice, and how that implementation can be improved.

Implementation of human rights standards is first and foremost an obligation of States. However all of us – non-governmental organizations, national human rights institutions, representatives of regional bodies, academics, and not least minorities and communities themselves, also have a vital role to play. All of these diverse actors are an essential part of the national framework that, when working together and in a spirit of dialogue and constructive cooperation, can not only implement human rights but can fundamentally change societies for the better. However, perhaps too often implementation of human rights is perceived only as a challenge rather than an opportunity.

Implementation of human rights standards must actively engage all national actors in a process of positive reform. When seen as an opportunity, implementation of human rights can be a means of bringing different stakeholders, including ethnic, religious and linguistic communities, together to

work towards common goals of equality and non-discrimination. A national process of implementing minority rights should be framed as a transformative opportunity to help strengthen understanding between communities, establish trust, identify root causes of problems as well as sustainable solutions, and build much needed bridges of inter-ethnic and inter-faith dialogue and cooperation.

We in the international community have an important role to play. That role is about supporting you in your national efforts, assisting and providing technical cooperation, and offering you the tools and resources that we have developed to help your work.

I am pleased to say that in 2012, we have two strong and complementary mechanisms for promoting minority rights within the UN system – the Independent Expert on minority issues and this Forum. Together, they address head on some of the most difficult and enduring problems facing minorities today. As the Secretary-General has informed us, this year we add to these mechanisms a new Network on Racial Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities. Coordinated by OHCHR, the Network will enhance dialogue and cooperation between relevant UN bodies and provide much needed expertise and guidance to help implement the Declaration.

During this year, my Office has undertaken numerous activities to raise awareness of the Declaration, including a series of sub-regional events on themes ranging from the rights of religious minorities to representation of minorities in law enforcement. You will be briefed on those activities during this session. I am proud of my office's role in contributing to the empowerment of minorities, including through our Fellowship Programme, which brings minority rights advocates to Geneva to gain experience at OHCHR and contribute to its work. I welcome some of those Fellows today who will share their experiences with you.

Let me conclude by thanking you all once again for your presence in this Forum. The work that you do over the next two days will help to promote implementation of the Declaration, and will also contribute ideas and possibilities to enhance implementation of all human rights standards.

I wish you a successful session. Thank you.