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Opening of the fifth session of the
Forum on Minority Issues

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Palais des Nations, Salle XX

**Madam Chair,
Madam President
Madam Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Distinguished delegates and participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is my great pleasure to be with you and to welcome you all to this very special session of the Forum on Minority Issues which marks the 20th anniversary of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.

In this 20th anniversary year we rightly celebrate the Declaration which remains an essential international standard for minorities globally. But this is also an opportunity for us to reinforce the messages and principles that the Declaration contains and to remind UN Member States and all other stakeholders that its implementation is as important today as ever. It is a time to reflect on the positives, but also to acknowledge the many problems that remain in every region. I am concerned by some negative trends that we are witnessing globally and by the information I receive from minorities on a daily basis that demonstrates to me that we cannot relax our efforts to protect the rights of minorities, but rather we must intensify them.

In some countries affected by conflict and communal tensions minority families and communities are at risk of violence in their everyday lives. Today the rights and security of religious minorities is perhaps of particular concern in all regions and attacks on individuals, communities and their places of worship have increased alarmingly. Racist and xenophobic attacks are on the rise in some countries, sometimes inspired by a political and social discourse of “them and us” in which minorities, migrants and those with another faith, color, language or culture are portrayed negatively including in the media and particularly in these

times of economic hardship. In other cases the challenges and discrimination faced by minorities are not in the form of violence, but rather in the shape of institutional discrimination or structural and administrative barriers to the enjoyment of their rights, the use of their language or the practice of their religion. Some long-standing and entrenched issues continue to evade real progress – the situation of the Roma in Europe is a prominent but far from isolated example. Minority women and girls continue to face unique challenges and multiple forms of discrimination that cannot be overlooked.

Nevertheless, despite these and many other remaining challenges, in many countries, the principles of the Declaration have been incorporated into Constitutions, legislations, policy and practice. And as a consequence, there are many nations in which equality and non-discrimination are considered to be core foundations of just and fair societies and strenuous efforts are made to protect the principles of minority rights and to promote inclusion and integration. In such countries diversity is more likely to be seen in positive terms. Those belonging to a different ethnicity or religion are more likely to feel secure, to be integrated and able to take part fully in the cultural, economic, political and social aspects of society while also being able to practice their faith and use their own language freely and without hindrance. Where minority rights are respected, children grow up to understand that the diversity that they find in their classrooms is normal and something to be welcomed, learned about and celebrated.

The drafters of the Declaration emphasized that the protection and promotion of minority rights contributes to political and social stability of the States in which they live. I am particularly pleased to welcome here some of those who were involved in the drafting of the Declaration and its Commentary, Mr. Patrick Thornberry, member of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and Professor Asbjørn Eide, former Chairman of the United Nations Working Group on Minorities. I very much look forward to hearing their views about how much progress has been achieved since the adoption of this important document and whether it is fulfilling the role they wished to give it.

This Forum is an opportunity to share and learn from good ideas and practice – both the big international and national practices to promote implementation of the Declaration, and the smaller local level initiatives and creative activities that provide practical solutions that can really make a difference to peoples' daily lives and have been shown to do so in practice.

In my report to the General Assembly this year I stated my belief that the positive requirements for the protection of minority rights contained in the Declaration are best achieved via a national institutional and policy framework

incorporating targeted attention to minorities. Minority rights protection frequently requires measures that go beyond non-discrimination recognizing that disadvantaged minorities may need focused attention to ensure their rights and equality. Dedicated institutional attention provides the necessary impetus for proactive implementation of minority rights, positive measures, consultative and participatory mechanisms and processes, and activities directed towards minorities that are frequently lacking. Establishing institutional attention and expertise on minority issues provides the logical next step from legislation to concrete action and implementation.

Numerous governments have put this into practice and established specialized governmental bodies or departments focused on minority issues. Such bodies often have primary responsibility to design, direct and lead government policy on minority issues as well as an essential role in coordination of activities across government institutions. Attention to minority rights should also be incorporated into the work of national human rights institutions, ombudspersons, equality bodies and specialist commissions, but too often that attention is missing. Advisory and consultative bodies are another important form of institutional attention to minorities and minority issues. Building on the vital principle of minority participation they can help to institutionalize dialogue between government and minorities and ensure that minority issues are reflected in local and national policy and decision-making processes. This institutional attention may be particularly important where inter-community relations are historically complex, where long-term challenges persist, or where ethnic or religious tensions or conflict exist or have previously occurred.

During these two days, I would also like to hear from you how the recommendations of this Forum could be best used. Previous speakers have referred to the newly established UN Network on Racial Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities. I am excited by this UN initiative and have already engaged with the Network members to offer the support and assistance of my mandate. I am looking forward to our cooperation and have already made a concrete suggestion that they use the recommendations of this Forum in their work and as a tool for formulating concrete steps on enhancing minority protection and the fight against racial discrimination.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to the young minority rights advocates to this Forum from different regions, including some who are sponsored by OHCHR as part of its Minority Fellowship Programme. Minorities are not homogeneous and it is particularly important to hear diverse voices including those of young people and minority women who frequently have different experiences, face different challenges and have alternative perspective and creative ideas. For example, young people may have new ideas and skills such

as how to use new technology and social networking as a means to reach new audiences and communicate information more effectively about minority rights and the Declaration. So as we go into our discussions, I say to them and to you all, let us think creatively, let us learn from each other and let us use this important session of the Forum as the beginning of a much wider and ongoing dialogue towards implementation of minority rights for all those groups who face challenges globally.

Having taken over the mandate of Independent Expert on minority issues in 2011, I was also privileged to take on the responsibility to guide this Forum and prepare its annual meetings. In fulfilling this dual role, my job was made much easier by my predecessor, Gay McDougall, who joins us at this session of the Forum and whom I would like to pay a special tribute to. We owe Gay a debt of thanks for shaping the Forum into the vibrant, dynamic and inclusive mechanism that it is today and for helping us to be able to say with confidence in this 20th anniversary year that we now have a body of the United Nations system on and for minorities that is worthy of the Declaration and the challenges that face minorities globally.

Thank you.