

Opening speech by Ms Soyata Maiga,

President of the 5<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues

*“Implementing the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities: Identifying positive practices and possibilities”*

Tuesday 27 Novembre 2012, 10:00am

Palais des Nations, Room XX

Madam President,

Distinguished delegates and participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Friends and colleagues,

It is an honour for me to speak to you this morning, while we are opening the 5<sup>th</sup> session of the Forum on Minority Issues on *“Implementing the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities: Identifying positive practices and possibilities”*.

I had the pleasure to take part in the 4<sup>th</sup> session of this Forum on *“Guaranteeing the rights of minority women”* last year. Hence I am back with you feeling proud and committed, while being entirely aware of the importance of the role I was given.

I am particularly happy to chair this session of the Forum which marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this crucial document, namely the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. These coming days should be seen as a celebration of this important Declaration and the positive results that we got since its adoption in December 1992. This is an opportunity for all of us here to reflect on the promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to minorities, in particular the space dedicated to minority issues within our programmes and respective activities, as well as to congratulate each other for the progress we did on this issue. Yet this moment of reflection is also an opportunity for us to be more conscious of the persisting challenges and the numerous hurdles – recurrent and new – that hinder the effective implementation of the Declaration as well as the absolute respect for minority rights in all regions.

Since its very first session this Forum was able to give a voice to minorities from all over the world, coming from very diverse backgrounds. It was concerned with central themes like the right to education of minorities and the right to their effective participation in political and economic life in the society they live in. The Forum was also able to pay particular attention to the situation of women and girls belonging to minorities who are sometimes victims of multiple forms of discrimination. I take the opportunity here to appeal to all of you to increase the efforts in order to implement the recommendations of the 4<sup>th</sup> Forum, while making sure that the rights of women and girls belonging to minorities are guaranteed.

I am pleased to see that once again several representatives of minorities from all regions of the world are present among us today. I am glad to be able to listen to them with you and to benefit from their specific experiences which will guide our efforts in our global struggle for equality and non-discrimination.

The Forum was able to become a unique opportunity for all speakers, including member states, representatives from the civil society, the United Nations, its specialised institutions and other international and regional organisations, as well as representatives of minorities of course, to share their experiences and good practices relating to the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Yet we have to recognise that today there is still a deficit in the attention given to the situation of minorities in the regional systems. Considering my personal experience as a member of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, and in particular as a President of the Working Group on indigenous populations/communities in Africa, I am well aware of this necessity for the various regions to pay more attention to these issues. Hence I would like to encourage the relevant regional intergovernmental bodies on the protection and promotion of human rights to increase their efforts in order to make sure that minority issues get more attention in their work and actions within their respective regions. This can consist, for instance, of awareness-raising, information activities, and the dissemination of the Declaration, through the promotion of this instrument in their work and through fostering its implementation at national level while making sure that this issue is included in their activities and programmes.

Let me please highlight the fact that this dialogue between all stakeholders is essential considering the fact that there is simply no preestablished answer or solution in this field. The protection of the rights of minorities and the promotion of diversity can only be ensured through collective and continuous effort. Moreover, it is necessary to recall that any step undertaken with the aim to implement the Declaration, no matter their efficiency, should be regularly and consistently reviewed, so as to still be relevant to the context of a given society.

It is important today to remember that in every country minority communities live and have a right to equality. The Declaration recognises the obligation of all States to promote and protect the rights of minorities living in their territory. Anyone must renew their commitment to guarantee the protection of these rights as enshrined in the Declaration and other relevant international and regional human rights instruments.

The drafters of the Declaration acknowledged the linkage between social and political stability and the promotion and protection of the rights of minorities in the States they live in. Moreover, its Preamble underlines the fact that the realisation of the rights of persons belonging to minorities, being an integral part of the evolution of society as a whole and within a democratic framework based on the rule of law, contributes to strengthening the friendship and cooperation between people and States.

As was shown in the previous sessions of this Forum, all regions have examples of good practices regarding the promotion and protection of the rights of minorities. These examples, and many others, will be discussed during the current session. We should use them as models to replicate and adapt to different situations.

Challenges that subsist show that we should double our efforts to promote diversity, which is inherent to our societies, and to protect the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Together we shall reiterate the fact that intolerance, racism and discrimination are not only socially and morally unacceptable, but they are also major hurdles to sustainable development, peace and stability.

Thus, I invite all of you to take full advantage of this unique Forum in order to continue the dialogue, share recent experiences, and discuss current practices while reflecting together on innovative and creative strategies aiming at an effective implementation of the Declaration at national level. Finally, as part of this exercise, I wish to call upon all participants to adopt and keep a positive and constructive approach that is rooted in human rights, while focusing on the issues addressed in the course of these two days. We should not neglect the magnitude of the challenges to be overcome so that principles of equality and non-discrimination become a reality for everyone. But let us inspire each other with our collective efforts within this Forum and with the examples of good practices that we will have the privilege to share in our work.

I wish all of us a fruitful and constructive dialogue.

Thank you very much.