

6th Geneva Forum on the rights of minorities (26-27 November 2013)

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights / Palais des Nations – Geneva / Switzerland

“Freedom of religion or belief: guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities”

Ms President of the session

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

My speech is about **“Minorities in Iraq, victims of religious, ethnic and communitarianism-driven conflicts”**

- Allow me to cry out on behalf of whole Iraq and all Iraqis, who suffer because of the inexistence of a culture of dialogue in the country since 2003.

- Today, the Middle-East is boiling on a hot plate and Iraq is certainly an important element in the tensions among the countries of the region and the international community.

- According to international norms, minorities shall enjoy two types of rights: the national law, which is imposed by the concept of national citizenship, and the law related to their minority status, which requires to maintain the heritage and authenticity of minorities. But minorities in Iraq are marginalised and excluded from the participation to higher State positions, and they are also a target for many sides. Political parties in power look down at them because of this nomination. Moreover, minorities are sometimes used only for political aims and agreements, or before the media for electoral aims and in order to polish the image of political parties.

- Everybody is aware that acts of religious and sectarian violence are only a “Fitna”, or incitement that leads to keeping the social fabric torn. Even politicians recognised it. In today’s conflicts, the whole is against the whole. This is the tragedy of a whole people, in the absence of a patriotic concept and civilised dialogue. Nor is there any partnership based on the real interests of the State instead of the religious, ethnic, or sectarian interests.

- While violence has affected everyone without exception, we can agree that minorities are hit harder because of the conflict between political powers for money, honour and power.

- Regarding dialogue, Muslim, Christian or other religious leaders coexist, fighting in a very wise and fine manner for the promotion of dialogue and for putting an end to migration and forced displacements that affect especially minorities. Yet their call for realising justice and equality for all remain unheard by politicians and the government.

- Today, we cannot accept any more a Western policy that encourages Iraqis to migrate, which empties the country from its citizens and competences. Instead of this, the international community should make an effort to put pressure on politicians in order to give them natural rights and integrate them into the

political process of an honest partnership, having equal citizenship with those in power, and also limiting the acts of violence against them.

- Non-governmental organisations of the civil society do their best to sow the seeds of love and harmony. I welcome the proposition of numerous entities of the Iraqi people in solidarity with the victims of the tragic events that happened at the church Notre-Dame de la Délivrance on 31 October 2010. I myself was a witness and a victim, while 45 were assassinated, including two young priests. This tradition is still alive, for the third consecutive year. It is a good sign of encouraging solidarity. I also would like to mention a gesture of solidarity with a Christian colleague who had lost a member of her family. Her colleagues did a remarkable action of solidarity at the university, asking for a minute of silence before the start of the exam. The dean and other professors gave their sympathy. This shows well that social solidarity still exist among the Iraqi people. Similarly, other religious and ethnic entities are sympathetic to their Muslim brothers during their rituals. Thus, we can assume that the problem is not among the people, but due to politicians.

- We need to change our spirit, humanitarian vision, and patriotic criteria that preserves the unity of the Iraqi State so that it becomes an example of a developed civil state that enjoys freedom, democracy, and that guarantees the rights for all, without discriminating against anyone. This still doesn't exist, as showed by the current political chaos, the atmosphere of communitarianism that is rejected by all, the lack of security and services, and the unemployment rate, despite the country's great wealth.

- Injustice always limits the freedom of women at work and of female students in schools and universities. These impose narrow-minded lifestyles, such as wearing the headscarf, and women are also harrassed in public spaces or when they travel. At the same time, non-Muslims are seen as rivals and are fought against in their life and career, both in the public and private sphere. The clearest proof are the attacks against social and cultural centers but also shops selling alcoholic beverages – which belong to non-Muslim minorities – that were destroyed and closed down by militia belonging to influential political blocs.

- In addition, the law on civil and personal status is oppressive against non-Muslim minorities. The personal and civil status of the majority is imposed on them which deprives them from their right to freedom of religion and belief, in particular in the case of a religious conversion of a non-Muslim parent.

- I invite all states involved in Iraqi affairs, who contribute to maintaining instability in Iraq, to stop their interference in Iraqi internal affairs, if they are really serious about human rights and they truly wish to implement the Declaration on Human Rights. They should help solve our problems, in encouraging a civilised dialogue, rather than inciting one party against the other, or strengthening one party over the other. For information, despite the problematic character and complexity of these questions, and its double character, Iraqi people still have a spirit of compassion, generosity, hospitality, jealousy and patriotic intimacy.

- While Martin Luther King heard a voice saying "I have a dream", and this dream came true after patience, perseverance and stubbornness, I also declare: "I have a hope, and the expectation" that my country, Iraq, will recover and go back to the road of dialogue, coexistence, and civil peace, through sovereignty and the rule of law. I would like to close my speech with these positive and optimistic words. Maybe this wish won't come to realisation immediately, or even after a while. But I trust the great powerful one who strengthens us that we will achieve at least part of this wish after this event.

- As far as recommendations are concerned, it seems imperative to me that revising the Iraqi constitution is the most important step. Some articles and paragraphs need to be changed so as to conform to the willingness to build a developed, civil state that is based on the equality of all citizens in their rights and

duties. The constitution should also urge everyone to forbid Iraqi blood while including “others”, those who are different in their religion, doctrine, and ethnicity.

Thank you for listening.