

**United Nations Forum on Minority Issues  
Geneva, 25 November**

**Speech given on behalf of Jennifer Welsh, Special Adviser of the United Nations  
Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect**

I would like to express my gratitude to the United Nations Forum on Minorities Issues for dedicating this session to preventing and addressing violence and atrocity crimes against minorities. I would also like to thank the Forum for inviting me to deliver these remarks on behalf of Jennifer Welsh, the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect.

Distinguished delegates and participants,

At the 2005 World Summit, Heads of State and Government committed to the responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. This entails the responsibility of States to protect their own populations from atrocity crimes; the responsibility to help other States do so through the provision of international assistance; and the responsibility to take collective action when a State manifestly fails to protect its population. The principle builds on existing obligations under international law and seeks to enhance compliance with those legal commitments. Above all, it embodies the international community's political determination to prevent and respond to atrocity crimes.

In particular, the word "populations" refers to **all** people living within a State's territory, whether citizens or not, including national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities. This is very much in line with Article One of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, according to which "States shall take measures where required to ensure that persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law".

Regrettably, reports from around the world reveal that minorities too often face marginalization and stigmatization, and are enmeshed in conditions of structural vulnerability that can lead to discrimination, persecution, insecurity and, ultimately, violence.

The consequences can be devastating, both for them and their communities, and for the wider social fabric of a country. To take the most glaring current case, we are all familiar with the current situation in Iraq, where religious and ethnic minorities, including Christians and Yazidis, are being subjected to atrocious human rights abuses by extremist Islamist groups. But discrimination and persecution also reign elsewhere. In Myanmar, Buddhist mobs have carried out targeted attacks against Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine State since June 2012. In Ukraine, ethnic and religious minorities continue to be at risk in the context of wider armed violence.

Each of these groups would directly benefit from efforts to fulfill the Responsibility to Protect. In 2009, the Secretary-General produced a comprehensive strategy for implementing the responsibility to protect based on three equal, mutually-reinforcing, and non-sequential pillars. Pillar I focuses on the national responsibility of States to protect their own populations; Pillar II on the provision of international assistance, and Pillar III on timely and decisive response. All three pillars are relevant for addressing the risks national minorities face.

With respect to Pillar I, States can provide practical protection to their minority populations and uphold their rights in a number of different ways. Inclusive and fair governance is essential, particularly in terms of ensuring equal access to justice, education, and participation in public life. States are also responsible for putting in place effective legislation to prevent acts of violence and prohibit incitement to religious and ethnic hatred. In practice, this may require providing physical protection to minorities, monitoring actors that might instigate violence, and establishing oversight procedures for the police and security forces.

In polarised societies, those who have influence over the population - including religious and other community leaders – play a particularly important role. They can fan flames of resentment to incite their followers to violence, or serve as powerful voices for peace. Recognizing this dynamic, the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect has developed a paper outlining policy options

for different stakeholders - including States, civil society, the media, and the international community - to prevent incitement to violence based on ethnic or religious hatred. The policy options stem directly from the Rabat Plan of Action and call in particular for States to build resilience against incitement to violence, counter hate speech with positive messages, and encourage the use of positive and alternative speech by political, religious and other community leaders.

Given the particularly important role that religious leaders can play in today's crises, our Office has also decided to organise a forum with senior religious leaders from across different faiths to explore the specific contribution they can make to preventing atrocity crimes. We hope that this Forum will take place in the first half of 2015.

States, international organizations, regional organizations, and other actors can also play an important role by offering assistance to national authorities to help them protect their minority populations. Pillar II of the Responsibility to Protect identifies three main forms of support. First, States can encourage each other to address the threats minority community face. This could entail the dissemination of relevant law and norms, as well as education and training. But in situations where tensions are rising, encouragement can take the form of informal political dialogue, preventive diplomacy, or mediation. It also encompasses peer-review processes, such as the Universal Periodic Review, which provide a vital forum for identifying risks relating to minorities and proposing preventive action at an early stage. Second, international actors can help build national capacities that inhibit atrocity crimes. National minorities will particularly benefit from a professional and accountable security sector, impartial institutions that provide oversight for political transitions (especially elections), independent justice and human rights mechanisms, national and sub-national capacity to identify and resolve inter-communal conflicts, a media prepared and capable of counteracting hate-speech and incitement, and effective transitional justice arrangements following instances of widespread violence. Third, the international community can provide temporary military, civilian, and humanitarian assistance at the request of a State struggling to manage an ongoing or impending crisis. This may take the form of specialized civilian expertise, peacekeeping support to establish basic security and protect vulnerable minority populations, or emergency assistance to avoid an escalation of the crisis related to unmet humanitarian needs.

While the Responsibility to Protect emphasizes the primacy of preventing atrocity crimes, situations do occur in which a State manifestly fails to protect its population. Where national authorities are unwilling or unable, Pillar III embodies the international community's commitment to take collective action in a timely and decisive manner in accordance with the United Nations Charter. This could involve targeted sanctions against the perpetrators of violence against minorities, diplomatic initiatives to pressure or isolate relevant parties, special political missions led by representatives of the Secretary-General, referral to the International Criminal Court, and action authorised by the Security Council under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.

As I have outlined, implementing the Responsibility to Protect involves a wide range of tools. Much more can be done by using existing mechanisms and resources in smarter ways to address the risks facing minorities and other groups vulnerable to atrocity crimes. As proposed by the Secretary-General in his 2014 report on the Responsibility to Protect, our Office will be undertaking a review of the progress made in implementing this important principle since the 2005 World Summit. In addition to identifying where capacity has been built, and where gaps remain, this process will also set a new, ambitious agenda for the decade ahead. It will grapple with emerging challenges, such as those posed by non-State actors like the so-called Islamic State in Syria and the Levant, and identify clear priorities for improving the practical protection provided to populations at risk. I can ensure you that the concerns of national minorities will be at the heart of this exercise.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that the international community's commitment to uphold the Responsibility to Protect is more important than ever in our globalised world, where populations are constantly changing and migratory flows are contributing to making States more and more heterogeneous, including in terms of ethnic and religious representation.

By upholding minority rights, States not only set the foundations for protection structures within their national borders but also create the conditions for social stability and cohesion, thus building resilience to atrocity crimes. Clearly, protection is prevention.

I thank you for your attention.

