

9th Forum on Minority Issues

Protecting minority rights to prevent or mitigate the impact of humanitarian crisis

24 November 2016

Distinguished Vice-President,

Excellencies,

Colleagues and Friends,

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the UN Forum on Minority Issues. Each year, the Forum brings together hundreds of representatives of minority communities, civil society organisations, Member States, agencies and other bodies and programmes of the UN, intergovernmental and regional organisations, national human rights institutions and experts to focus on upholding the rights of minorities.

Your focus on humanitarian issues is extremely timely. This is a period of dramatic volatility.

Current levels of humanitarian needs are the highest since the Second World War. As 2016 draws to a close there is little indication that the scale and intensity of most of these humanitarian emergencies are diminishing. To the contrary — violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law are escalating in many conflicts and spreading to more. Hospitals are bombed, entire towns are besieged, people are deliberately starved or driven from their homes.

We are also seeing warning signals indicating several additional situations may be approaching critical turning-points. Today's discussion of ways to better protect the rights of minority groups before, during and after humanitarian crisis is indeed urgent.

Whether a humanitarian emergency stems from conflict, environmental disaster or pandemic, members of minority communities are among the most vulnerable of victims. Firstly because all pre-existing human rights concerns — and notably discrimination, exclusion and structural inequalities — are likely to be exacerbated in crisis. If authorities were indifferent to the concerns of minorities prior to disaster, they are unlikely to focus on them in an emergency situation. But in addition, today's conflicts are frequently driven by discrimination — by sectarian ideologies that seek to dominate or crush other identities. When the primary goal is to drive out minority groups and eradicate their identity, the suffering of women, men and children will be acute.

Six months ago, with all humanitarian actors at the outer limit of their capacity to manage today's emergencies, the Secretary-General convened a World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul to try to promote greater collective responsibility for reducing risk and alleviating suffering in humanitarian emergencies. Member States, humanitarian and development actors pledged to step up their action and better integrate their work. Yet last week, OCHA - the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - announced massive funding gaps for multiple emergencies — stark evidence of widespread failures of foresight and compassion. My Office has markedly increased its action in the humanitarian context in recent years. In Istanbul, we committed to further strengthening that engagement — particularly in order to ensure that due attention is paid at all stages of the humanitarian situation to the needs of particularly vulnerable and at-risk groups. They include

minority communities, as well as people within minority groups who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as peoples with disabilities, women and children.

It is essential that humanitarian actors and coordination mechanisms put protection of the rights of all victims at the centre of humanitarian response. Not every victim is easily visible, and it is precisely those who are most likely to be ignored who may face the greatest risk — requiring assistance to identify and amplify their voices and concerns.

It is also crucial that our advocacy, guidance, technical assistance and efforts to monitor facts on the ground help to generate the swift international and national responses which can prevent massive eruptions of violence against minority communities and others.

The Secretary-General's Human Rights Up Front action plan aims to heighten the focus of every UN entity on protection and prevention, particularly in response to warning, signals of escalating human rights crises. It has spurred action to defuse some situations, demonstrating that it is sometimes possible to avert potentially massive violence. In several countries, Human Rights Up Front has galvanized the attention of UN Country Teams to long-standing human rights concerns, including pervasive discrimination against minorities. It has also created opportunities to integrate human rights analysis more deeply into the UN Development Assistance Framework, including analysis of discrimination against minorities.

My Office works continuously with UN and other humanitarian actors in a range of countries to establish deeper, clearer and more accurate systems for early warning. And last year my staff and the UN Department of Political Affairs began deployment of fast-moving "light teams" to boost

responses to situations of strong human rights concern. The first light teams were sent to Burkina Faso, Lesotho and the Republic of the Congo.

However, I believe we in the UN can and must do better. Protecting minorities amid escalating crises is a task that needs much deeper and broader engagement. Humanitarian emergencies require coordinated and effective responses from governments, UN entities, regional organizations and NGOs. This Forum provides a key opportunity to clarify the roles and responsibilities of these various humanitarian actors to advance minority rights.

I hope we can also promote the involvement of national human rights actors, especially NHRIs, with humanitarian coordination structures. And I must emphasise the need to involve civil society at every level of decision-making, including the voices of minority communities. We need to continue our strong advocacy for accountability, and for the rights of victims to protection and effective remedy. On that point, I want to pay tribute to the invaluable work of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Ms. Rita Izsak-Ndiaye as the end of her term approaches.

To prevent and resolve conflicts, reduce risk, build resilience and sustain peace, the only sustainable solutions stem from the protection of human rights — among them, the rights of all members of all minority groups to participate in public life, retain their cultural identity and live alongside others in equality and dignity. Today, many societies today appear to be splintering into defensive — and even mutually hostile — communities. Multiple armed conflicts have taken on sectarian dimensions. The Yazidi in Iraq have suffered a genocidal campaign of attacks by Daesh, and many other minority communities are under attack. Unprincipled political leaders are seeking to stoke the forces of prejudice, scapegoating vulnerable foreigners and minorities for a whole range of social ills.

And yet I look around this room and I can see only the beauty of diversity, and the health and wealth of any society which embraces the mingling and juxtaposition of identities, traditions and views. I pay tribute to your resilience, dignity and conviction. And I pledge the unwavering support of my Office to your cause.

8.7 minutes

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