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**Twelfth Session of the United Nations**

**Forum on Minority Issues**

*“Education, Language and the Human Rights of Minorities”*



OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

**Statement by H.E. Coly Seck**

**President of the Human Rights Council**

**Geneva, 28 November 2019**

**10:00-13:00**

**Room XX, Palais des Nations**

High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet  
High Commissioner on National Minorities, Lamberto Zannier  
Co-chairs  
Distinguished delegates and participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to open this twelfth session of the Forum on Minority Issues on *“Education, Language and the Human Rights of Minorities”*.

Firstly, I would like to warmly welcome and congratulate the two chairpersons of the Forum, Ms. Anastasia Crickley and Ms. Astrid Thors, who have kindly accepted the important task of co-chairing this session of the Forum. They bring a wealth of experience in the field of minority issues: Ms. Crickley was a member and Chair of the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and a member of the Advisory Committee for the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the protection of National minorities, and she has an ongoing engagement on minority issues, including through civil society; and Ms. Thors has been the OSCE’s High Commissioner on National Minorities, Chair of the Advisory Board on Human Rights of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, as well as Chair of the Swedish Assembly of Finland. I also welcome and thank Dr. Fernand de Varennes, the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, who is mandated by the Human Rights Council to guide the work of this important Forum and prepare its annual sessions. I would like to welcome representatives of Member States, United Nations specialized agencies, representatives of human rights mechanisms and bodies, international and regional organizations, national human rights institutions, as well as non-governmental organizations, academics and experts.

Since its establishment in 2007, through the Human Rights Council resolution 6/15, the Forum has served as a unique annual meeting point, and a mechanism that promotes dialogue and cooperation among various stakeholders on issues pertaining to minorities. I am particularly pleased to see that this Forum has been successful in bringing together hundreds of minorities from all over the world who have travelled to Geneva to share their personal experiences and discuss challenges and good practices in the protection and promotion of minority rights. I would therefore like to extend a special welcome to all representatives from minority communities, who are here today and who will contribute constructively and substantively to the Forum’s discussions, as well as to thank them for their efforts to come here and be the voice of their communities.

I wish to extend also a warm welcome to the distinguished panellists and moderators, who have kindly accepted to come to Geneva and to share with all of us their expertise, to provide food for reflection and discussion on the importance of inclusive, multilingual and intercultural education, and to shed light on specific policies and initiatives that promote and ensure access to mother-tongue education by persons belonging to minorities.

Minorities around the world today face persisting significant challenges in accessing quality education and in particular education that contributes to the preservation of their language and identity. Specific conceptions of national unity and societal cohesion and security have created the space for the dominance of one language and culture over the others and put obstacles to preservation, use, further development of minority languages and cultures.

In 2008, the inaugural session of the Forum on Minority Issues addressed for the first time the right to education and minorities and recommended that States provide adequate opportunities to persons belonging to minorities to learn their mother tongue or to learn through the medium of the mother tongue, and such opportunities be chosen in consultation with them. Other recommendations highlighted the importance of enhancing the availability of teachers and of teaching materials in minority languages. This year's Forum is an opportunity to further build on these discussions, to share good practices and to delve upon the challenges in the promotion and development of minority language education, in the context of the global rise of hate speech and violence targeting the “other”, the “foreigner”, the most vulnerable.

The Human Rights Council has highlighted in many occasions, including through its resolutions and other activities, the importance of education in promoting inclusive and tolerant societies, which ultimately leads to the realization of all human rights. The latest Human Rights Council resolution on the right to education 41/16 of July 2019 reaffirmed the universal relevance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the importance of ensuring the effective implementation of Goal 4. It called on States to take all necessary measures, including sufficient budgetary allocations, to ensure accessible, inclusive, equitable and non-discriminatory quality education and to promote learning opportunities for all, and to strengthen engagement with all relevant stakeholders, including communities, local actors and civil society in this regard.

At this point, allow me also to commend the work of all Special Procedures mandate-holders, including the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, for addressing specific minority concerns in their substantive reports, communications and official country visits, including in the area of education and the language rights of minorities.

I welcome the topics of the Forum's four thematic panels, on the importance of recognizing minority language education as a human right, on public policies, legislation and institutional initiatives in this regard, on educational methods and approaches that promote education in and teaching of minority languages, as well as on empowerment of minority women and girls through access to quality education, in particular minority language education, in line with the principles and rights enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and other relevant international instruments.

The Forum invites us to constructively engage in the discussions that will take place in this room. The interactive, inclusive and universal character of this Forum is the foundation of its strength and importance. A potential that can be fully realized with the relentless commitment of all those actively engaged in the promotion and protection of the rights of minorities, and in particular the tireless work of civil society organizations and human rights defenders around the world, often at risk of their own lives and their families.

I would like to reconfirm the Council's commitment to protect all those individuals who cooperate with the United Nations and its mechanisms against any act of intimidation, harassment or reprisal.

Chairperson, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish you all a fruitful dialogue over the next two days and invite you to constructively share ideas and experiences with the view to effectively contributing to the formulation of concrete recommendations which will lead to the implementation of tangible legislative and policy initiatives.

Thank you.