

16th session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues

Opening Statement by Prof. Dr. Petra Roter, Co-Chair of the Forum

In ten days, the world will mark the international day of human rights. This year, we will also commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But few outside this room may know that at that very same session, on the tenth of December 1948, the General Assembly adopted another document: a resolution titled 'Fate of Minorities'. In that very short resolution, the General Assembly recognised that the United Nations »cannot remain indifferent to the fate of minorities«. It also described the matter as a »complex and delicate question« with »special aspects in each State in which it arises«. Furthermore, it called for a »study of the problem of minorities in order that the United Nations may be able to take effective measures for the protection of racial, national, religious or linguistic minorities.« This early testimony of the need to reconcile the human rights agenda with a commitment to protecting minorities was resolved globally with the adoption in 1992 of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.

In practice, however, 75 years after the commitment of not being indifferent to the fate of minorities, minorities are still too frequently referred to and viewed as a problem, including as a security threat, rather than being accepted by everyone as part and parcel of our diverse societies. One would expect that 75 years later, and indeed more than three decades after the adoption of the UN Declaration on minority rights, we would all truly internalise the fact that »promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities contribute to the political and social stability of States in which they live« and that »constant promotion and realisation« of minority rights »as an integral part of the development of society as a whole« ... »would contribute to the strengthening of friendship and co-operation among peoples and States«. All this is written in the 1992 UN Declaration. So the knowledge of why minority rights are needed and why they have to be respected has been present in the international community for years, decades, in fact.

I am sure that many who participated in drafting these resolutions, right after the end of World War II and after the end of the Cold War, would have expected that by now prevention of discrimination, including intersectional discrimination, and ensuring equality of everyone, regardless of ethnic, linguistic, religious or

any other affiliation and identities, were to become a normal state of affairs. They would have expected these goals to be pursued by the authorities at all levels, by individuals and communities, and indeed achieved in all corners of the world. The same goes for possibilities for persons belonging to minorities to freely express, develop and promote their cultures, languages, religions; for possibilities to effectively participate in decision-making, including in the socio-economic life, to be active and equal members of our societies. All these principles and norms should have been firmly embedded in our societies. Accordingly, access to minority rights should have paved the way for societal integration and cohesion.

Sadly, observing the developments around the world, we seem to be very far from those goals. It is so disappointing to listen to so many horrible accounts of violence, abuse, instances of assimilation, discrimination, exclusion..., but let us bear in mind: history teaches us why respect of minority rights as human rights, with persons belonging to minorities having a say, an agency, is needed. It is beneficial – not only for persons belonging to minorities and minorities themselves, but for our diverse societies, for all of us, for individual states and hence also for the world. It is less, not more, minority rights that is a problem. It is not respect of minority rights that has a tendency to lead to open conflicts. On the contrary, it is violations of human and minority rights, and failure to prevent such violations, that can lead to frustration, disintegration, also to conflicts and instability.

All this is a combined message of the 15 UN forums on minority issues that have taken place so far – no doubt, the 16th forum will echo this message. Civil society activists, human rights defenders and experts have been conveying that same message to governments over and over again – with the hope that they will not just listen to but also hear and act. That they will stop violence against persons belonging to minorities, discriminatory policies and practices... Once again: all such human rights violations will not lead to stability, societal cohesion and ultimately peace. As a human being, I wonder when will states globally, across the international community, understand that discrimination, exclusion, inequalities ... cause frustration, cause actions, including against governments, that they lead to backlash in which everyone loses? How much more human potential will remain unrealised just because individuals belong to minorities and are thus the unequal 'other'? The 'unwanted or even a threatening other'? When will states understand that human rights, including minority rights, are meant to ensure dignity of every human being. When will they accept that to enable the conditions for effective equality, equity, including in the socio-economic field, is

the only rational and reasonable policy? It makes sense to effectively address exclusion, inequalities, unequal opportunities for persons belonging to minorities. Not only are such inequalities and exclusion unjust, but they generate detachment and resistance - actions to change the present state of affairs, sometimes by any means, including illegal and illegitimate. Action for inclusion and equity is thus also action for societal cohesion and integration, stability and peace. It benefits entire societies. Experts have spoken on many occasions, so have human rights defenders. They will do so over the following two days. There will be different opinions, like at every forum. But ultimately, we all need to make a choice – dignity for everyone, or only for some.

I trust you will join me in the hope that the suffering we are witnessing in so many parts of the world, with inhumane struggles for that little humanity, that little dignity... will finally lead to the realisation that enough is enough. 75 years is a long period and a good opportunity to rethink again about the 'fate of minorities' and persons belonging to them, about their human rights, including minority rights.