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OPEN DISCUSSION

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Forum on Minority Issues
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Intervention under the 3rd Agenda item: Perspectives from young minority rights advocates on the Declaration.

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2012 OHCHR Minorities Fellowship Programme

Mme Chair Person,
Mme Independent Expert,
Distinguished delegates and colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here today representing young minority rights advocates working on the rights of religious minorities. While we can celebrate some progress, we should also make our best to overcome the challenges facing the people belonging to minorities in general and the youth in particular.

Over the past years, religious minorities have been facing escalating restrictions of the freedom of religion or belief. Some analysis¹ show that the number of countries with high or very high restrictions on religious beliefs and practices is rising.² This in effect means that three quarters of the worlds' population live in countries with high government restrictions on religion or with high social hostilities involving religion, which is in opposition to international human rights standards. Therefore, the young minority rights advocates have a great role to play in reinforcing our belief in the Minorities Declaration and doing our best in raising awareness and taking effective actions to ensure its effective implementation in our societies.

In the spirit of the Minorities Declaration and taking into account that respecting the rights of religious minorities improves the stability of the society, some countries found ways of engaging in inter-faith dialogue. To translate this dialogue into everyday life, we encourage all to live by the principles encompassed in it and make sure that the inter-faith dialogue engages everyone.

However, due to a lack of dialogue in some countries, religious minorities in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa, West Africa, Asia, have been subjected to various forms of discrimination, religious intolerance and violence, for example:

¹ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life

² The number of countries with high or very high restrictions on religious beliefs and practices rose from 31 % in the mid-2009 to 37% in the mid-2010. The full report is available at <http://www.pewforum.org/government/rising-tide-of-restrictions-on-religion-findings.aspx>

§ Places of worship were destroyed, desacralized, religious or community leaders killed or abducted;

§ Eviction from lands and displacement

§ discriminatory legislation limiting the rights of religious minorities, making them feel as second class citizens, depriving them of enjoying the same rights that are guaranteed to the religious majority.

Hope, generated by the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, has empowered various youth movements and advocates to demand their rights. However, in many countries human rights conditions, particularly those related to the freedom of religion or belief have worsened.

So far, the drafting processes of some of the new constitutions and legislations are leading to stricter limitations and more discriminatory attitudes towards religious minorities. Such actions in turn contribute to creating a climate of impunity. We, young minority rights advocates, must be represented in the drafting committees of these new constitutions and work our best on including the respect and protection of Minority Rights as stipulated in the Minorities Declaration.

The freedom to change and choose one's religion has been a concern and an issue in many states. For instance, members of the Dalit community, who have converted to Christianity or Islam may find themselves victims of discrimination and cannot benefit from affirmative action in education and employment available to the members of the Dalit community who practice another religion, which is in contradiction with the spirit of the Minorities Declaration.

In some countries, anti-conversion and anti-blasphemy laws contribute to an atmosphere of tension and can lead to discrimination (access to employment) arrest, convictions, even death penalty. The right to proselytise by means of non-coercive persuasion, convert to another religion or to take up a different belief system should be used voluntarily and freely, without any negative consequences.

The shrinking number of persons belonging to religious minorities, as a consequence of discrimination, can put these communities at risk of disappearing. In some regions of the Middle East and North Africa, where communities such as Jews, Christians, Greeks, and Armenians were traditionally strong in numbers and organizations, the last decades have brought about the situation where the communities and their infrastructures no longer exist, and only individuals remain. This is a real risk for instance for Christian minorities in the Middle East and North Africa, where after the first world war they represented over 30% of the population and now find themselves at less than 10% of the population³.

³ An example are for instance Jerusalem Christians, who in 1922 slightly outnumbered Muslims (53.57%) and today make up under 2 per cent of the city's population (Source: Census of Palestine (British); Harrel and Stendel, 1974)

We, young minority rights advocates, recognizing the immense importance of ensuring freedom of religion or belief world-wide, reinforcing our belief in the importance of the Minorities Declaration, highlighting the major importance of its effective implementation in our societies, urge the this 5th Forum to:

1. Call upon governments to guarantee the fundamental right to change one's religion or belief, without jeopardizing one's human rights.
2. Urge governments to abolish discriminatory provisions related to religious affiliations in constitutions and national legislations.
3. Invite governments to adopt laws addressing incitement to religious hatred and violence, ending the culture of impunity.
4. Encourage countries to conduct Inter-faith dialogue on the national, regional and international level.
5. Invite young minority rights advocates and movements to create a Forum for Inter-faith dialogue bringing together youth belonging to minorities and majorities.
6. Invite young minority rights advocates and movements to put creative ideas into action, such as: summer/training camps for minority and majority youth, Introducing pilot project: interfaith schools)
7. Encourage young minority rights advocates and movements to use Social Media network (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) to spread tolerance instead of hatred and divisions while raising awareness of the Minority Declaration.
8. Invite governments in cooperation with Civil Society and in particular with young minority rights advocates and movements to institute a **National day of Religious Tolerance, which will include presentations by Minorities, their culture, traditions, customs, etc.**

Thank you.

