

**Remarks by United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser Nderitu
Panel Discussion “Impact of Majoritarianism on Religious Minorities in South
Asia”**

U.S. Capitol, Washington D.C.

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Distinguished members of the U.S. Congress,

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to join you today at the U.S. Capitol to discuss a very important aspect of my mandate as the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for the Prevention of Genocide, that is, the protection of religious minorities. Our geographical focus for this panel discussion is on South Asia, and I welcome the opportunity to share with you the work my Office has been carrying out particularly in that part of the world to prevent genocide and other atrocity crimes.

This discussion is very timely as this year – on 9 December – we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Ratified by 153 States, the Genocide Convention has been guiding nations all over the world to prevent the heinous crime that aims to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, and to punish its perpetrators when prevention fails. Many countries have domesticated the Genocide Convention and on this important year we acknowledge the leadership of many nations that have passed national laws to ensure the efficacy of the Convention and are implementing actions to honor its principles, such as the establishment of national committees for genocide prevention.

Many other nations, however, still have not signed or ratified the Genocide Convention. Asia is the second continent with the highest number of countries – 15¹ – yet to sign, accede to or ratify the Convention. I will continue to advocate in bilateral, regional, and multilateral meetings for the universal ratification of this important legal document as a necessary aspect of genocide prevention that reaffirms the sovereign responsibility of every

¹ Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Japan, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

nation towards its population, whatever the race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion of the people.

The world has witnessed the consequence of failing to prevent genocide and other atrocity crimes. The wounds left by the Holocaust, as well as the genocides in Rwanda in 1994 and Srebrenica in 1995 are yet to be healed. My Office was established in 2004 as an acknowledgement that the international community had indeed failed to prevent past instances of genocide. But most importantly, it was established as a commitment to prevent future genocides and other atrocity crimes.

My Office acts as an early warning mechanism to the Secretary-General, and through him to the Security Council, to bring to their attention situations that could result in genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. A team of analysts monitors all regions of the world, guided by the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes, developed by my Office. This Framework supports the assessment of the risk factors for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Risk factors are the conditions that increase the susceptibility to human rights violations and, eventually, to atrocity crimes.

Unfortunately, no country is free from the risk factors of atrocity crimes. Situations that degenerate into a genocide are often the ones that ignore the warning signs of mounting tensions, intolerance, discrimination, polarization, and violence. Genocide and atrocity crimes do not occur spontaneously. Perpetrators need time to plan, develop capacities, mobilize resources, and take action. And my Office brings to the attention of the decision-makers of the multilateral system those warning signs.

Aside from the analytical work, my Office is also mandated to build the capacity of governments, civil society, and UN entities on atrocity prevention. Partnerships with various stakeholders, including religious and traditional leaders, secular and religious civil society organizations, government officials, new and tradition media, allow us to advance prevention. Regarding religious leaders, in 2017, in partnership with the Kingdom of Morocco, my Office launched the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, also called the Fez Plan of Action. This Plan consists of a set of options and tools for actions that religious leaders and actors can take to prevent and counter incitement to violence where there are risks of atrocity crimes. Actions include engaging in dialogue with those that express radical views, supporting interreligious and intercultural discussions, promoting education; and upholding activities that promote cultural diversity, respect for diversity, and countering hate speech.

The Fez Plan of Action is available in my Office's website in all the UN official languages, and I echo the call of the UN Secretary-General to its widest dissemination and implementation to help save lives, reduce suffering and make a reality the vision of respect for diversity and peace. The Office's website also makes available the policies we produce to foster atrocity prevention globally. Recent policy papers have tackled combating Holocaust and genocide denial; addressing hate speech through education; and the role of sports in countering hate speech.

Countering hate speech is an important aspect of our work. Since 2019, my Office has been the focal point of the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech and in this capacity it has been supporting UN field entities to develop context specific action plans on countering and addressing hate speech, understood as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, gender or other identity factor." The Office also supports Member States, upon request, in developing their capacities to address and counter hate speech in line with international human rights law and standards, and the right to freedom of opinion and expression in particular.

By addressing hate speech, we contribute societies based on inclusiveness and respect for the human rights of all people without discrimination. Escalation of tensions that could spill over into violence may also be avoided. Leaders, including political, religious and community leaders, should use their voice to reject hate speech and promote inclusion, respect for diversity and peaceful coexistence. In tackling hate speech, it is particularly important to hear the voices of the victims as well as those who are most marginalized and vulnerable, including ethnic and religious minorities.

Education has been vital in our efforts to prevent atrocity crimes and their incitement globally. It has been recognized across the UN system as a powerful tool to promote pluralism, inclusion, respect for diversity and mitigation of long-term risk factors, such as discrimination, prejudice and dehumanization of groups based on their identity. Through comprehensive teaching methods, students can have a better understanding of past atrocity crimes, including the underlying causes, dynamics and processes that have led to them. Education equips the new generations with the knowledge, critical thinking skills and tools to reflect on their society, identify early signs of atrocity crimes, and act against the warning signs.

In Southeast Asia in particular, my Office has for the past two years implemented an initiative to strengthen educational responses to atrocity prevention in the region. As part of this initiative, my Office partnered with the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) to develop a teacher's guidebook and provide training to teachers from the region, building on the experience and good practices of Cambodia in integrating atrocity prevention in their educational system. At the University level, we supported the development of a course curriculum on atrocity prevention for undergraduate students, in partnership with the Asia Pacific Center for the Responsibility to Protect (APR2P Centre), the University of Gadjah Mada in Indonesia, and Chulalongkorn University in Thailand. The teacher's manual and the University curriculum provide an opportunity to raise awareness among students of the risk factors of atrocity crimes and to learn from past instances of atrocity crimes how these crimes can be prevented.

Since I took office as Under-Secretary-General, I have had the opportunity to visit Asia. In April last year, in my first visit to the region, I travelled to Bangladesh. Specifically, I travelled to the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar to engage with and bring attention to the continued dire situation of the Rohingya and the need for action. As I noted at the end of my mission, the Rohingya continues to be one of the most vulnerable communities in the world. They have suffered decades of discrimination, dehumanization, deprivation of their identity and basic rights, including to citizenship in Myanmar. The extreme violence witnessed in 2017 against the Rohingya, in which they were killed, tortured, raped, burnt alive and humiliated, on no other basis than their identity, should never be forgotten. The need for justice and our collective action remains as urgent as ever before. I also continue to be alarmed over increasing negative rhetoric against the refugees that is reported across the region. The international community needs to do more to ensure that the Rohingya are not forgotten, and that the conditions that led to them fleeing are addressed. Returns should only happen when they are voluntary, safe, and sustainable. In this regard, host communities also need to be supported until returns are possible. The Rohingya has already suffered some of the worst violations and atrocities imaginable, we cannot fail them again.

Unfortunately, division, hate and discrimination based on identity, including religious identity, continues to be a challenge, globally and in the region. Asia is a region rich in religious and ethnic diversity and with a well know history of promotion of the principles of respect, non-discrimination, and equality. South Asia has strong nations, that alongside faith-based organizations and civil societies carry out impressive work to nurture the traditions of respect for diversity and to strengthen the foundations for peace.

Yet, as we gather here today, I remain concerned with the increase in rhetoric of exclusion, intolerance and hate that is reported in the region, often at the expense of the most vulnerable groups such as religious minorities. Such trends have been reported in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. In some instances, this has been accompanied by physical attacks. In Afghanistan for example, I remain concerned over the situation of ethnic and religious minorities, the Shia Hazara in particular. Throughout the last few years, there have been several attacks against this community, targeting their places of worship, schools, and communities. The Special Rapporteur on human rights in Afghanistan has noted in his reports from 2022 and 2023 that this type of attacks, often claimed by ISIL-KP, seems to be widespread and systematic and bears the hallmarks of international crimes. I echo this concern.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I mentioned earlier, no country is free from the risk factors for atrocity crimes. When those risks exist alongside the persecution of minority groups based on religious, ethnic, national, or racial identity, the situation, if unaddressed, can escalate into a genocide or other atrocity crimes. Threats to freedom of religion or belief - as religious intolerance and incapacity to accept diversity - challenge the very foundations of international peace and security as well as the respect of fundamental human rights.

The first human rights documents adopted in 1948, that is the Genocide Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, demand protection of the freedom of religion and belief of racial, ethnic, national, and religious groups. The principles and norms of those human rights documents are as relevant today as they were in 1948 and I recall the responsibility of countries, civil societies, religious and traditional leaders, and every single citizen to make freedom of religion and belief the norm and the precondition for the respect of the dignity of all human beings based on the principle of non-discrimination.

While States have the primary responsibility to protect populations from atrocity crimes, other actors in society, including religious and traditional leaders and actors, play a very important role in preventing and mitigating their risk factors. Indeed, prevention is most effective when it is anchored in and implemented by local communities that at times can recognize early warning signs of atrocity crimes better and even before any other actor.

My Office has been closely engaging with religious and traditional leaders and actors for the prevention of atrocity crimes. To develop the Fez Plan of Action that I mentioned earlier, my Office organized a consultation with religious leaders in South and Southeast Asia to

generate good practices and recommendations related to the implementation of the Plan of Action in the region. The latest such initiatives were in June and December 2021, one with a regional focus and the other focused on the situation in India. Religious and traditional leaders in South Asia exert great influence in their communities and we count on them to maintain their commitment to peace, respect for diversity and non-discrimination in the pursuit of a region free of atrocity crimes.

As I continue leading the United Nations efforts to prevent genocide and other atrocity crimes, I count on the leadership of the United States and of this distinguished Congress to join forces with my Office to counter hate speech and religious intolerance in South Asia and ensure that no racial, ethnic, national, or religious group is at risk of atrocity crimes in this region and beyond. This was the vision that fueled the actions of Raphael Lemkin, the man behind the Genocide Convention, and 75 years from the historical moment of the Convention's adoption, let's renew our commitment to its principles.

Thank you.