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Mr. Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for this opportunity to brief the Human Rights Council about the issues regarding the mandate entrusted to me. The interactive dialogue with the Council – although brief – is energizing for mandate holders and it gives us better clarity and direction to the mandates we hold.

Human Rights Council resolution 4/10 of 30 March 2007 requested me to report on issues of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief. Consequently, I have focused my thematic report on the substantive questions involved rather than providing an overview of the mandate's activities. My report for next month's session of the Third Committee of the General Assembly will again include such an activity overview.

There are many issues of concern for my mandate. Let me just highlight some of them:

- In some countries, believers belonging to religious minorities are not allowed to worship or conduct any religious activities without State approval or prior registration.
- Furthermore, places of worship or religious properties have been attacked or otherwise subjected to restrictions. However, places of worship have also been misused by non-State actors for illegitimate purposes, including as a depository for weapons or as a hideout for holding hostages.
- Some States encroach on the appointment procedure of religious leaders or require approval by the authorities for certain promotions within religious groups.
- Children from families of religious minorities are allegedly forced to marry members of the majority religion and to adopt their faith.
- Girls and women are in a particularly vulnerable situation; many of them suffer from aggravated discrimination with regard to their religious, ethnic and sexual identities.
- Further vulnerable groups include persons deprived of their liberty, refugees, children, minorities and migrant workers.

Mr. Chairperson, the mandate I hold has several areas of concern but it has two main strands which must get equal attention. On the one hand, the freedom in pursuing one's religion or belief must be protected and respected. On the other hand, the rights of individuals have also to be protected from being violated on the premise of religion or belief. This mandate has noted, time and again, that victims of religious intolerance belong to all religions and beliefs. At the same time, the perpetrators, too, are not confined to one or a few identified religious or belief communities. Ganging up against minority views can be detected both at national and international levels.

Freedom of religion or belief is a multifaceted human right. The mandate practice shows that the effective protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief poses serious challenges to all States. Furthermore, the prevention of intolerance and discrimination requires creative initiatives from all actors involved.

What should be the appropriate role of Governments in promoting freedom of religion or belief? In my opinion, wise and balanced decision-making at all governmental levels as well as non-discriminatory legislation are crucial for addressing the delicate issues involved. Furthermore, an independent and non-arbitrary judiciary is a prerequisite for safeguarding freedom of religion or belief. States must provide adequate protection to victims and effective remedies in cases where the right to freedom of religion or belief has been violated.

Protection needs to be complemented by prevention efforts. States should devise pro-active strategies in order to prevent acts of intolerance and discrimination. It is a challenge for good governance to identify and adequately address possible conflicts between communities of religion or belief ahead of time. This requires concerted efforts to analyze the religious demography and existing problems. Moreover, States need to review policies and administrative approaches in all issues involving freedom of religion or belief. However, specific legislation should be introduced in a cautious manner since any compulsory overregulation may be counterproductive.

Education can play an important preventive role especially when it ensures respect for and acceptance of pluralism and diversity. The quality of education and learning materials is crucial. States should take appropriate measures to bring their school curricula, textbooks and teaching methods in line with human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. My predecessor has already devoted much energy to these questions, which culminated in the International Consultative Conference on "School Education in relation with Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and Non-discrimination". Currently, I am also involved in efforts by a regional organization to develop guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools.

The media as well as museums and libraries can also positively contribute to education. For example they could provide relevant knowledge on religions or beliefs, showing the diversity within each community. Unfortunately, there is also evidence of the propagation of discriminatory stereotypes of religions or beliefs. In this context, I would like to recall article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which provides that "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law".

In a joint report with my colleague Doudou Diène, we have reported precisely on this issue last September. One of our recommendations was to encourage the Human Rights Committee to consider the possibility of adopting complementary standards on the interrelations between freedom of expression, freedom of religion and non-discrimination. In a recent letter, the Chairperson of the Human Rights Committee indicated that the Committee is particularly interested in drafting a revised General Comment on article 20 of ICCPR; since the Committee has already scheduled the drafting of other General Comments, it will examine the recommendation as soon as possible.

Finally, inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue should be encouraged. This could also include exchanges of views with believers who are dispassionate about their faith as well as with atheistic and non-theistic believers. Such a dialogue would also greatly benefit from the perspectives of women and of young people. Moreover, States should be encouraged to provide funding for events where pupils and their teachers can participate in regional or international cultural exchanges.

If we manage to establish mutual tolerance, understanding and interest at the grassroots levels we might ultimately prevent many incidents of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.