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17th session of the Human Rights Council

**Panel on strengthened international efforts to foster a global
dialogue for the promotion of a culture of tolerance and
peace at all levels, based on respect for human rights and
diversity of religions and beliefs**



United Nations
Human Rights

OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Opening address by

Ms. Navi Pillay

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

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Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to participate in this important panel discussion.

We are here to explore how we can enhance international efforts and foster global dialogue for the promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace, based on respect for human rights and diversity of religions and beliefs.

Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 of 24 March 2011, aimed at “Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief” is itself the result of constructive engagement and dialogue. It provides a good platform for a better understanding of the challenges we face and how we can surmount them.

Indeed, through this consensus resolution, the Human Rights Council has sent the message that through dialogue and collaboration, States could step up to their obligations and take practical decisive actions and measures to address and eliminate incidents of intolerance, discrimination and violence based on religion or belief.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over the past years, several resolutions adopted by the United Nations noted that intolerance, including anti-Semitism, islamophobia and christianophobia, is on the increase. These phobias fuel suspicion and mistrust and have led to incidents of unequal treatment and violence against members of religious groups. Negative stereotyping in the media or by extremist political parties, advocacy of religious hatred, together with physical violence against religions also continue to be alarming trends across the globe.

The World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in 2001 as well as the Durban Review Conference, and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination through its General Comment XXV have highlighted that multiple forms of discrimination may affect individuals and groups. For example, women all too often suffer from discrimination on the grounds of both gender and religion or belief. In some countries, laws continue to discriminate against women, such as legislation that prohibits or imposes the donning of the veil in public because of its religious symbolism. Migrants may similarly face discrimination on the basis of their status as well as descent, national or ethnic origin. Around the world today we are witnessing an increase in anti-migrant sentiment and discriminatory practices affecting their human rights.

Xenophobia is also often triggered by, or stoked with, intolerance against groups seen or feared as outsiders because of their origin, or customs or faith. It is a phenomenon requiring more consideration and study about its actual root causes and about how and when it may become discriminatory behaviour and violence, subject to action by Governments.

Another important consideration is the role of public discourse in fostering xenophobia or in exacerbating xenophobic sentiment and behaviour. I must say that I am concerned about the increasingly worrisome rhetoric of the popular media, some public officials and personalities in many parts of the world. We have all heard prejudice-laden terms to define outsiders which are perilously close to incitement to racial, religious, national hatred.

Excellencies,

In studying and addressing these issues, we must be guided by the principles of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the right to freedom of opinion and expression. It is often purported that freedom of expression and freedom of religion are contradictory. This is a mistaken assumption. As I often underscored, these freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Freedom of religion cannot exist if freedom of expression is not respected. Likewise, freedom of expression is essential to creating an environment in which a constructive and respectful discussion about religion and belief can be held.

We must continue seeking a balance between these rights. I do not underestimate the difficulty of this balancing act. Where does freedom of speech end and incitement of religious hatred and violence begin? What degree of incitement to religious hatred and violence amounts to advocacy? Where is the causal link required to sanction such behaviour? Recent incidents in various places around the globe including desecrations and attacks on sacred sites and places of worship come to mind. In this era of inter-connectedness, an incident in one part of the world can be so incendiary as to have tragic consequences in other parts of the world.

States must be vigilant and respond immediately and appropriately. Ultimately, it is the State which bears the primary obligation to protect victims of human rights violations and prevent occurrences of intolerance, discrimination and violence against persons based on their religion or belief. Let us recall article 4 of the 1981 United Nations *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* which sets forth that, and I quote, "States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief"...and that "All States shall make all efforts to enact or rescind legislation where necessary to prohibit any such discrimination..." End quote.

States should also act as catalysts for intercultural dialogue. In this regard, education is crucial in fostering respect for all human rights and religious diversity. By committing in practice – through laws, measures, words and deed - to *all* human rights, States can promote religious harmony and facilitate the intercultural dialogue which helps create peaceful and stable societies.

I am pleased to see representatives of civil society on this panel and in the audience today as this dialogue must also take place at the grassroots level and with the involvement of civil society. Similarly, inter-faith dialogue initiatives should be promoted. The role of media, religious and faith leaders and other civil society actors should not be underestimated. An inclusive dialogue – such as that we are having today – brings about a better understanding of different views, cultures and religions and beliefs.

I look forward to what will no doubt be an engaging and thought-provoking discussion that, I am sure, will help to promote a culture of mutual respect for diversity and a better appreciation of its enriching quality.

Thank you.