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## **EUROPE AS A SPACE FOR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION: STATEMENT**

On behalf of the United Nations Office for Human Rights, I am extremely honored to be here today, and I would especially like to thank the organizers for their initiative and leadership in the organization of this Congress. Intercultural dialogue and mediation are themes that lie at the very heart of the UN's principles and objectives. They also line the path towards the realization of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Intercultural dialogue and mediation are also crucial elements for the establishment of Europe's vision of *unity in diversity*, a vision of a continent that takes pride in its many different cultures, traditions and languages, where respect for cultural diversity is a prerequisite for social harmony.

Regrettably, we are living in an increasingly fragmented Europe, where cultural differences are being used to divide populations, where exclusion has become a strategy to win elections, and where hate speech has become commonplace. This Congress is indeed both timely and relevant.

Today, prejudice and stereotypes threaten our social fabric, and we are witnessing the marginalization of those who are viewed as "different" - migrants, persons of African descent, Roma and other minorities. Growing xenophobia and the narrative of exclusion is fueling contemporary debates about identity, social cohesion, and even the use of development assistance... This, against a backdrop of fear; a fear of a loss of national identity in the face of rising immigration, a fear of reduced access to opportunity, and a fear of terror attacks...Fear which is ultimately fueling divide.

So, the question is how can we cultivate unity and understanding in Europe in the face of such divide? How should we move forward from here? The fix is certainly not an easy task, it is complex, but it is *NOT* impossible. The way forward lies in the respect for cultural diversity and inter-cultural

understanding. Intercultural dialogue and mediation are key techniques for moving away from hatred, fear and discord towards a dialogue that recognizes our shared universal values based on human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which was adopted by the member states of Unesco in 2001, conveys the agreement that *the defense of cultural diversity is ... inseparable from respect for human dignity*, and affirms that *respect for the diversity of cultures ... is among the best guarantees of international peace and security*. The values of dignity and inclusion are at the heart of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The twin principles of equality and non-discrimination are also the cornerstone of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which has been ratified by all countries in Europe. This treaty commits States to an obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill cultural rights under international law.

In practical terms, this means creating a climate of respect and inclusion: preventing discrimination through human rights education and robust legislation; cultivating fair and equal societies through education and dialogue, and through policies that guarantee social rights for all. To be effective, intercultural dialogue must include all groups and sectors of society, of all backgrounds, young and old, men and women. It must allow the exercise of free expression and the free flow of information. Above all, it requires the participation and willingness of citizens on the one hand, and a strong leadership on the other to move towards increased social cohesion and understanding. On this note, I would like to commend Portugal – both the government and civil society – for its efforts to unite its population through policies of inclusion, intercultural dialogue and education. Portugal has shown true leadership in Europe in this area, establishing laws to punish hate crimes, and putting in place policies to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized populations and those in a situation of vulnerability.

On behalf of the UN Human Rights Regional Office for Europe, I commend Portugal's good practices, particularly regarding migration, as well as the initiatives that are in place for the promotion of intercultural life at the local level, through education in schools, through police training, and through various awareness-raising initiatives. Intercultural mediators are also working within the Portuguese public service to facilitate communication between public service employees and non-EU migrants, with the idea of gaining mutual understanding and trust between cultures, and to prevent and resolve disputes.

We hope to build on these valuable practices in the coming years, as we work together to engage other countries of the European Union to follow suit, and, we count on Portugal's leadership in the European Union as a voice of moderation in an anti-migrant climate increasingly driven by a security agenda rather than a human rights agenda.

Our conversation today is one of great importance when we consider that the ultimate aim of intercultural dialogue and mediation is the achievement of peace and understanding. This conversation is important because intercultural dialogue and mediation mirror our common desire to achieve a life of harmony and happiness, to live together "in peace". But these are not static concepts. Rather, like marriage, *living together* is a continuous social process of give and take, of mutual respect and understanding. It is a process that depends on our interactions as citizens, on the interaction of groups and states to establish a relationship that accepts one another's differences and balances our mutual interests... a process that is facilitated by intercultural mediation.

This year, we celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that was drafted by representatives of diverse legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world. It sets out our universal values and a common standard of achievement. The 70th anniversary is a unique opportunity for ALL of us to reflect on how far we have come and, on the road ahead. Most importantly it is time to revive the key messages of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Perhaps we might consider the first article of this milestone document, which states that, *all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and... should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*

Lasting peace requires respect for diversity. Let us cherish cultural diversity as a vibrant source of exchange, innovation and creativity, one that gives Europe strength. Through dialogue and mediation, we must remind ourselves of our shared identity – an identity that is based on the universal values of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

I am hopeful that the outcomes of this conference over the next two days will provide a valuable stepping stone to renewed dialogue, and I wish you all a fruitful discussion.

Quote

Van Hout, B. (2019). Europe as a space for intercultural dialogue and mediation: statement. In A. M. Costa e Silva, I. Macedo & S. Cunha (Eds.), *Livro de atas do II Congresso Internacional de Mediação Social: a Europa como espaço de diálogo intercultural e de mediação* (pp. 428-430). Braga: CECS.