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HUMAN RIGHTS BODIES AND MECHANISMS

Letter dated 31 August 2007 from the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), addressed to the President of the Human Rights Council

Please allow me to raise the following matter with you.

On 18 June 2007, one year after its first meeting, and in compliance with General Assembly resolution 60/251 of 15 March 2006, the Human Rights Council agreed on a package of elements that established the procedures, mechanisms and structures which will form the basis for its future work. The decision on the abolishment of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights calls into question the existence of the Sub-Commission's Working Groups on Minorities, Indigenous Populations, Contemporary Forms of Slavery, and the Social Forum.

The Working Group on Minorities has been providing the only forum at the United Nations level dedicated to minority matters. It offered a valuable platform for dialogue and exchange of views on minority issues between United Nations Member States and civil society, with a vital role for minority representatives. Such a channel to discuss minority concerns is not only essential for the protection and promotion of minority rights but is also vital in the light of conflict prevention, which lies at the heart of my mandate. If this particular forum will not be replaced with a similar adequate mechanism, this will result in the weakening of the United Nations human rights framework.

In view of the above, I would urge the members of the Human Rights Council to consider establishing a successor mechanism to the Working Group on Minorities which will be able to build upon the achievements of the Working Group, developed over a period of more than 10 years. In order to be able to take on this role, any new mechanism which will continue the work of the Working Group should be provided with a strong mandate as well as with sufficient resources for the fulfilment of its mandate. Furthermore, the future mechanism on

minority rights should be as inclusive and transparent as possible, inter alia, by allowing participation of minority groups and other non-governmental organizations, including those who may currently lack consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. In addition, I would like to express my support for a central role of the Independent expert on minority issues in the work of such a body, which would enhance the complementarity of both mandates.

Please allow me, Your Excellency, to wish you all the best in your important work in guiding the further reform process of the Human Rights Council, and please accept the assurances of my highest consideration.

(Signed): Knut Vollebaek,
OSCE High Commissioner
on National Minorities
