Opening Statement by H.E. Joachim Rücker, President of the Human Rights Council to the fifth session of the Istanbul Process, Jeddah 3 June 2015

June 3, 2015

United Nations

http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16035&LangID=E

Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, It is a privilege and a great honor for me to participate in this 5th session of the Istanbul Process. Actually, the aspiration of this process – and this meeting here in Jeddah – matches perfectly with one of my main concerns as President of the Human Rights Council – and that is the reason why I am particularly glad to be here. Let me explain: Before I was elected President, I had a number of talks with my colleagues in Geneva and other Human Rights Experts [– some of you, as I see, are also present today]. And in these conversations, I was basically asking one question: Which are the main challenges the HRC has to tackle in order to better fulfill its function as the main political forum for the promotion of Human Rights within the UN system? These conversations allowed me to outline three baskets to focus on throughout the year: Relationship Geneva/ NY Efficiency of the HRC The Council’s effectiveness and its impact on the ground. I don’t want to elaborate on the first two points – as we in Geneva have had good and substantive discussions on both points. With regard to Geneva and New York, as well as with regard to efficiency, many ideas are on the table, and I am optimistic that we can achieve some substantial progress. But of course, the litmus test for the work of the HRC is its effectiveness, its impact beyond Room XX and on the ground. And this is what the Istanbul Process is about: To better implement one of the Council’s landmark resolutions. This Process is a fine example for states not just negotiating and tabling a resolution – which often is, as we all know, difficult enough – but for taking ownership of its very implementation. If each State focuses on implementation of the resolution, we can also overcome the politicization of this important subject-matter more easily. Religious intolerance and violence committed in the name of religion rank among the most significant human rights challenges of our times. Examples are plentiful: The murderous attacks against the French magazine “Charlie Hebdo” and the kosher supermarket in January this year were followed by several acts of violence against Muslim places of worship. Just a few days before this incident, two Egyptian policemen were killed during an attack against a Coptic church near Cairo. In 2014, more than 200 Christian schoolgirls were kidnapped by the terrorist group Boko Haram. Rohingya Muslims fled persecution in Myanmar, which led to the latest migration crisis in South-East Asia. And it becomes almost impossible to count the victims of the abhorrent crimes of the so-called “Islamic State” – and these victims, as you know, are mainly Muslims. It would be easy to continue this saddening list. But I think one thing has become clear: Acts of discrimination, intolerance and violence concern members of almost all religious groups in all different regions of the world – as well as those who convert or who choose not to be affiliated to any religion at all. Freedom of religion, as enshrined in Art. 18 ICCPR, protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. And religious tolerance implies tolerance for all religions and beliefs everywhere. It is essential for us to learn that tolerance in its truly universal sense can only be achieved by all of us together. Resolution 16/18 is considered by some as “one of the most important texts ever adopted by the Council”1. It was drafted to overcome the old antagonism existing between the resolutions on “Freedom of religion or belief” and “Defamation of religions”.Fighting religious intolerance while safeguarding the freedom of religion or belief is not a contradiction; both are aspects of the same fundamental rights. Therefore, it is paramount that the Council remains unanimous on both resolutions – 16/18 as well as “Freedom of religion or belief”. And maybe, one fine day, these important subjects can be even jointly addressed in one single text. With its detailed, build-in action plan, resolution 16/18 provides a useful framework for combating religious intolerance. Concerning the implementation, some advances have been made in the previous four Istanbul process events. But still a number of challenges lie ahead. These include: the need to accord balanced importance to all parts of the 16/18 action plan, to ensure balanced discussion about implementation across all States from all regions, the sharing of successful good practices, and measures to achieve a wider ownership of Istanbul process events. One proposal which, to me, seems to lead in the right direction would be the creation of a roadmap for the further implementation of resolution 16/18. This could include a series of sessions in the Istanbul Process which would ensure that all aspects of the action plan will be properly addressed. The three themes proposed for this meeting stem from resolution 16/18. These issues are as complex as they are important in today’s world. We therefore need to be vigilant not to allow inter-governmental political debates to occur in a vacuum, namely without taking stock of what is happening on the ground and similarly without taking account of what human rights norms and the work of international human rights mechanisms have to offer. Drawing on such international standards will help us overcome unnecessary obstacles such as the erroneous assertion that freedom of expression and freedom of religion were in competition and therefore could not be fully guaranteed at the same time. Instead, the international human rights norms teach us that the opposite is true: freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief are mutually enhancing and beneficial. We have to put the respect of human rights at the heart of all responses to religious intolerance. Res. 16/18 calls upon States to take concrete and effective measures against discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. But although States are primarily addressed by Res. 16/18, it seems evident to me that the combat against religious intolerance is a task for society as a whole. A strong civil society can help to foster an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect. Therefore, it is important to include the actors of civil society in this process of implementation. [This is why I am particularly pleased to see that the representatives of NGOs participate in today’s meeting2.] Last not least: Also the UN system as a whole – and especially the OHCHR – can and should make important contributions to the process of implementation of 16/18. One example of how the OHCHR has helped advance political discussions and stimulated implementation of the human rights norms is by means of the series of expert workshops on the prohibition of incitement to hatred in 2011 and 2012. This, as you know, led to the adoption of the Rabat Plan of Action which has been welcomed by stakeholders across the board. The reports of the special rapporteurs and the Universal Periodic Review also provide important information and might serve as indicators for the progress made in implementing 16/18. The working results of these institutions and mechanisms – and please excuse me for stating the obvious –, these working results depend on the cooperation of all states. Therefore, broad participation in these mechanisms appears to me as a relatively easy way to contribute to the success of the Istanbul Process and the combat against intolerance3. I wish us all fruitful discussions in the next two days and every success for this session. Thank you. Notes: 1. URG report, p. 15. 2. NGOs lt. Teilnehmerliste: Int. Federation for Human Rights, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch. 3. Only 15 member states contributed information to the latest report of the HC on combating intolerance. -