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14 March 2000

Most States have one or more minority groups within their national territories, characterized by their own ethnic, linguistic, racial or religious identity which differs from that of the majority population. Harmonious relations among minorities and between minorities and majorities and respect for each group's identity are a great asset to the multiethnic and multicultural diversity of our global society. The importance of promoting tolerance and understanding among different groups in society has long been recognized by the international community as a crucial element in ensuring the dignity and equality of all individuals, furthering participatory development and contributing to peace and stability within and among States.

International human rights standards, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, refer specifically to the value of intercultural education as a vehicle to encourage the knowledge of history, traditions, language and culture of minorities as well as that of society as a whole. The Working Group on Minorities, which has been established to, *inter alia*, review the promotion and practical realization of the Declaration has increasingly focused on the measures taken by States to ensure that opportunities are provided to learn and have instruction in the mother tongue, that curriculum development reflect the literature, history, geography, culture and religion of all groups in society, and that teachers promote a climate of acceptance and mutual respect in the classroom.

In the light of the importance of multicultural and intercultural education, I particularly welcome the initiative of the Working Group on Minorities and the "Centre d'études sur le droit international et la

mondialisation” of the Université du Québec à Montréal, to have organized this important seminar. It has provided a unique opportunity for the members of the Working Group and the participants to gain invaluable insight into the experiences of Canada, both at federal and provincial levels, in developing and promoting multicultural and intercultural education. The themes of the seminar, including the role of intercultural education in fostering social cohesion, education in the mother tongue, the right to manage educational institutions, and the principle of non-discrimination in the area of education, reflect the complexities of this subject.

I am convinced that the proceedings of this seminar will prove invaluable to the debates on this subject during the forthcoming sessions of the Working Group on Minorities and the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, as well as the World Conference against Racism. Furthermore, I hope that the content and outcome of the useful and constructive deliberations of this seminar as reflected in this publication will incite individuals, groups and authorities to eliminate those aspects of their culture which sustain xenophobia and racism, and attitudes and stereotypes which justify and reinforce prejudice and racial discrimination. This could represent one of the best means to encourage mutual appreciation of the differences between groups and increased tolerance among societies.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Mary Robinson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mary" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Robinson".

Mary Robinson
United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights