

Protection of minority languages is a human rights obligation, UN expert says



Rita Izsák, UN Independent Expert on minority issues. Photo: OHCHR

12 March 2013 – Half of the world’s estimated 6,000-plus languages will likely die out by the end of the century without urgent efforts to protect minority communities and their languages, a United Nations independent expert said today, noting also that minority languages have often been a source of tension for governments whose obligation it is to protect them.

“Language is a central element and expression of identity and of key importance in the preservation of group identity,” the UN Independent Expert on minority issues, Rita Izsák, said as she presented her latest report to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

“Language is particularly important to linguistic minority communities seeking to maintain their distinct group and cultural identity, sometimes under conditions of marginalization, exclusion and discrimination.”

She added that language can be a source of tension since proponents of linguistic rights have sometimes been associated with secessionist movements or have been seen as a threat to the integrity or unity of a State, which has “aggressively promoted a single national language as a means of reinforcing sovereignty, national unity and territorial integrity.”

Ms. Izsák, noted, however, that protection of linguistic minority rights is a human rights obligation and an essential component of good governance, efforts to prevent tensions and conflict, and the construction of equal and politically and socially stable societies.

In February, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) urged the use of books and textbooks in local languages to support education in mother tongues. UNESCO said translation into and promotion of local languages supports linguistic and cultural diversity and serves as the foundation for all social, economic and cultural life.

In her report, Ms. Izsák cites the need for education in minority languages, as well as their use in public life, media, public administration and judicial fields, among others.

According to the expert, historical factors such as colonialism have had a huge global impact on languages, resulting in the marginalization of and a rapid decline in the use of indigenous and minority languages, which were often seen as backwards, a barrier to colonial hegemony, or as slowing national development.

“It can also be argued that today globalization, the growth of the Internet and web-based information is having a direct and detrimental impact on minority languages and linguistic diversity, as global communications and marketplaces require global understanding,” said Ms. Izsák.

Independent experts are appointed by the Human Rights Council to examine and report back, in an unpaid capacity, on specific human rights themes.

(from <http://www.un.org/>)