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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS TO THE SIXTH ISTANBUL MEDIATION CONFERENCE

Istanbul, Turkey, 31 October 2019

Minister Çavuşoğlu,
Ministers, Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to join you for the 6th Istanbul Mediation Conference. This is an important opportunity to consider how we approach mediation, one of our most important tools to reduce and end conflict.

As the tragedy in Syria grinds on for an eighth year, with civilians paying the highest price, there could be no clearer illustration of the importance of political solutions to conflict.

Yesterday's first meeting of the Constitutional Committee was a landmark, a foundation for progress, and in itself a clear success of mediation. I hope this will be the first step towards a political solution that will end this tragic chapter in the lives of the Syrian people, also to create the opportunity for all Syrians to return to their places of origin, in safety and dignity, to end their status as refugees.

I welcome recent efforts to end the fighting in northeast Syria through dialogue. I remain very concerned about the situation in Idlib, and repeat my call for maximum restraint, de-escalation and the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure on all fronts in Syria.

In other countries and regions, particularly on the African continent, mediation and dialogue are having positive results. In Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Madagascar and the Central African Republic, we see a reduction in conflict and human suffering that is due in part to the efforts of mediators bringing parties together for peaceful dialogue. We must build on this success.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The complex and changing geopolitical context of conflicts has serious implications for mediation.

Divisions in the international community are contributing to unpredictability and insecurity. Mediators have always relied on the political will of governments and armed groups that are parties to the fighting. But now they must also work for the alignment of outside powers, as today's conflicts are likely to have regional and international involvement.

In many countries and regions, nationalists and extremists are exploiting divisions between people that increase the risk of violent confrontation. Even in some peaceful societies, leaders are fuelling tensions without care for the consequences.

At the same time, armed groups in many conflicts are fragmenting.

The resurgence of populism and the marginalization of minorities can contribute to isolation and radicalization, making people vulnerable to recruitment by extremists and terrorists. As the space for civil society comes under pressure, there is a danger of escalating instability, violence and suffering.

We are grappling with these challenges in Yemen, Libya, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and elsewhere. We need to mobilize mediation efforts at all levels to address them.

Ministers, Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Mediation cannot wait for a military stalemate or a request for help. There is a need for mediation at all stages of the peace continuum, from prevention to peacekeeping, peacebuilding and development, including between parties to protracted conflicts.

We have witnessed this in past mediation efforts from Cambodia to Central America that developed from contacts made when conflict was raging.

And we are currently supporting dialogue between the National Government of Papua New Guinea and the Autonomous Bougainville Government on the political future of Bougainville – using mediation as a preventive tool.

Our peacekeeping operations and special political missions undertake vital conflict prevention and resolution work, including mediation. My own good offices and those of my envoys aim to help parties peacefully resolve differences.

My High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation is providing advice on various political processes, and our Standby Team on Mediation have supported talks from Afghanistan to South Sudan and Papua New Guinea to Syria.

More broadly, mediation is part of our efforts to address both the root causes and consequences of conflict, particularly at the local level. Post-conflict peacebuilding, including reconciliation, transitional justice and reconstruction, is vital to prevent violence recurring.

Sustainable Development is an end in itself, but it is also one of the most effective tools we have to prevent and reduce conflict, and to build a better future with new opportunities. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is our blueprint for resilient, stable societies and to tackle the root causes of violence of all kinds.

Excellencies, ministers, friends,

My third point concerns the need to coordinate our work with the growing number of regional organizations, civil society groups and others involved in mediation.

Resolving today's complex conflicts means bringing together the three tracks of mediation in a coordinated way: track one comprising political and military leadership; supplemented by unofficial and informal contacts at the track two level to test ideas; and track three to widen the process, including civil society and grassroots initiatives.

The United Nations has close strategic and operational partnerships on mediation with regional and sub-regional organizations. Our work with the African Union is, in my opinion, exemplary and has enabled us to support joint approaches at the highest levels in countries across the continent, while our peacekeeping and political missions work to bring parties together at the national and local levels.

Independent actors and non-governmental organizations, including the Elders, are another critical complementary element.

Progress on women's participation in formal peace processes is slow, and this must be a special area for creative strategies. We need to build on previous efforts including the Syrian Women's Advisory Board and the Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group, and support regional women mediators' networks like the African Union's FemWise-Africa network.

Some 600 million young people in states affected by conflict can make a vital contribution to mediation and peacebuilding.

The first International Symposium for Youth Participation in Peace Processes earlier this year was an important step.

Despite the growing number of groups involved, a relatively small proportion of conflicts receive mediation. There is limited attention to low-intensity or "forgotten" conflicts. We and our partners must find the resources to engage across the board.

Excellencies, Ministers, friends,

My final point concerns the new technologies that are affecting the nature of conflict and our mediation efforts.

Social media platforms and digital technologies can improve outreach and inclusivity, particularly to women, young people and minority or marginalized groups. New technologies can also be used to monitor ceasefires in inaccessible areas, as we have seen in Ukraine.

But technology can create serious challenges for mediation. Online hate speech is a pervasive problem. Digital content can be manipulated to create poisonous narratives. Misinformation campaigns and artificial intelligence can be deployed against online inclusion efforts. And cyber weapons are already being used to amplify conventional military operations.

The United Nations Digital Toolkit for Mediators has been designed to support the safe use of new technologies in mediation efforts, with concrete recommendations and case studies. I commend it to you.

Communication between people will always be at the heart of successful mediation. But we must ensure this communication is as accurate, reliable and secure as possible.

Excellencies, Ministers, friends,

One of the many tragedies of war is that it holds back individuals, communities and societies for generations, preventing them from fulfilling their potential.

Who knows what could have been achieved by the people of the world towards ending hunger and disease, providing education and opportunities for all, if war and recovery had not consumed so many lives and so much energy and resources? We must do all in our power to end the meaningless cycle of destruction and reconstruction.

The United Nations was created almost 75 years ago to save the world from the scourge of war.

We are here today to further that objective: our first priority and our most important work.

Thank you.