Mr. President,
Excellencies,

I am honored to be here with you today and grateful for the opportunity to address the UN Security Council.

I’d also like to express my sincere thanks to the permanent representative of the United Kingdom, Her Excellency Karen Pierce, for her invitation for me to speak in this Open Debate on the issue of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is one of the main factors in gaining and sustaining peace. Allow me to spend a few moments sharing with you why reconciliation is so important for a lasting peace.

One of the tragic ironies of wars is that for a lasting peace, when it comes to an end, people on all sides must learn to live together again. Victims, perpetrators and others in war-affected communities begin the formidable task of reconciling with one another, politically and interpersonally, re-framing and re-humanizing their opposite numbers, rebuilding trust and accountability, and coming to terms with the legacies of the past.
Therefore, reconciliation is a process of restoring broken relationships, and has to engage deep-seated wounds of conflict. Reconciliation is also about learning to live nonviolently with radical differences.

However, post-conflict societies consist of large and disparate groups of actors with different experiences of the conflict and with different cultural codes and values. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the concept of reconciliation means different things to different people.

For the parents whose children were taken in a raid, it could depend on discovering what happened to them and seeing perpetrators brought to justice. For newly installed national leaders, the emphasis might be on expediency, burying the past in order to focus on the urgent challenges of the present. For ex-combatants, reconciliation might be their ticket to forgiveness or a fresh start.

It is because of this that reconciliation needs to be a tailor-made process, agile enough to adopt itself to changing socio-economic and political post-conflict dynamics.

In other words, reconciliation from a minimalist perspective could be about achieving the objective of coexistence. On the other hand, the maximalist approach emphasizes the importance of forgiveness, dealing with the past, and the rebuilding of trust.

Also, we should remember that a successful reconciliation is both an outcome and a process. As an outcome, it consists of mutual trust, mutual recognition, and mutual acceptance, as well as sensitivity and consideration for the other party’s needs and interests. As a process, it would need to incorporate wide-ranging changes, both structural and psychological.
Mr. President,

So, what have we learned from our reconciliation experiences over the years?

First of all, reconciliation should be a transformational experience—not about learning how to forgive and forget, but how to remember and change. The rebuilding of Stari Most, the famous footbridge of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina, could have been a great opportunity for such a transformational experience. Instead, the international community built almost the identical copy of the bridge, which was indeed a great success, but without giving opportunities to Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks for building bridges of trust between themselves during its reconstruction.

Secondly, reconciliation should always be based on local approaches, local vocabulary, and, most importantly, local actors. Their efforts, however, become too often dismissed by political actors. However, it is only through local approaches that we would have a chance to engage deep emotional wounds left by the conflict. Let’s remember that emotions are not just private reactions, but they are also the basis of socio-political forces which are critical for the construction of identity and community. Therefore, it is important to consider reconciliation in a way of recasting the emotional legacies of conflict.

Thirdly, different dimensions of reconciliation as interpersonal, inter-group, or interstate would demand different types of engagement, and accordingly, we need to consider different types of local actors. Local authorities, municipalities, and their potential power as insider reconcilers are often overlooked. For example, the city of Coventry in the UK, which was badly bombed during the Second World War,
led an amazing mission of reconciliation and worked with the war-torn cities of the Iron Wall countries, such as Dresden, Belgrade, and Warsaw, during the Cold War years. And with this, let’s recognize the bravery and foresight of insider reconcilers such as the Provost Howard, who, immediately following the bombing of the Coventry Cathedral, called for reconciliation rather than revenge.

Fourthly, financial support and projects only become helpful when part of a larger, locally designed and led process. UN and member states have to increase funding but also make it more flexible. Effective reconciliation requires agility to react to changing situations and longevity, which project cycles rarely enable. This is particularly important in order to ensure a full participation of women and young people, as they tend to be excluded and marginalized in wider peacebuilding processes. Without women and young people, reconciliation can never be successful.

Fifthly, it is important to remember that launching a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, would not be enough, though often necessary, to address past injustices and establish what has happened. Different undertakings of reconciliation, whether this is about truth-finding, reparations, dealing with the grievances of the past, writing a common history, education, or peace journalism, they should all be inter-linked with each other and with the wider socio-economic and political realities of post-conflict societies. Let’s not forget that reconciliation is a process, but not just a program!

Finally, we cannot, however, think that reconciliation only happens after violent conflict. It needs to happen all the time and everywhere, and sometimes may be as the first option to achieve peace.
In today’s world many societies are deeply divided along religious, political, ethnic, racial, or economic fault lines. Our politics are divisive! Therefore, we need to reduce prejudices, challenge stereotypes, and tackle de-humanization.

We need to support peace and reconciliation at the everyday level. Our activities as politicians, diplomats, civil society workers, academics, the media, and the private sector should engender trust, compromise, and cooperation.

Mr. President,

Reconciliation matters because if the individual and collective traumas are not addressed, residual grievances can provide the basis for self-perpetuating cycles of violence among future generations.

For divided societies to heal and come together, we need strategies in place that would allow them to negotiate past grievances, and they would need to reflect upon how memories and emotions force the past to become the politics of the present.

Designing effective reconciliation requires the involvement of relevant local actors, particularly women and young people, and as the international community, we should prefer to be loyal supporters of these processes that we help to design.

Faith can be significant inspiration for reconciliation, while its manipulation can also cause further division, hate, or violence. Faith actors, like all other actors, need to be scrutinized against their real actions, and that is what research, monitoring impact, and evaluation help to accomplish.
Reconciliation can only be effective when it is deeply contextual; however, sometimes the traditions that heal relationships may need to be revitalized. That is where knowledge on the local actors is critical, and building networks of actors collecting their good practices could inspire others.

At S-CAR, the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, and its newly founded Mary Hoch Center for Reconciliation, we undertake research on locally-led reconciliation practice.

With a specific focus on insider reconcilers, we facilitate collaborations among scholars and practitioners, examining how faith and indigenous narratives mitigate conflicts and heal community relationships, and we remain available to assist the United Nations and its mission to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly, SDG 16 - justice, peaceful societies, and institutions.

Thank you!