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Agenda item 3

Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Right of Reply

exercised by Ms. Marziyya Vakilova-Mardaliyeva

**First Secretary of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Azerbaijan
to the UN Office and other International Organizations in Geneva**

4 March 2021

Madam President,

I am exercising this right of reply to the statement made by the delegation of Armenia.

The rant of Armenia about protection of religious heritage is ridiculous, as this country is a monoculture society, which destroys Muslim Mosques and desecrates Holocaust memorials on its territory and which has wiped out the centuries-old Azerbaijani cultural and religious heritage during occupation of Azerbaijani territories.

Throughout the years of occupation, contrary to its imperative obligations under international humanitarian law, Armenia implemented the scorched-earth policy in the territories of Azerbaijan causing catastrophic consequences to the rich Azerbaijani cultural and religious heritage, which is an irreparable blow to world civilization. Thus, all 67 mosques were destroyed and vandalized. Defiled by Armenian graffiti, the mosques in Ağdam, Qubadlı and Zəngilan were used as pigsties and cowsheds. Furthermore, Armenia has deliberately mined majority of cemeteries and historical sites in the de-occupied territories of Azerbaijan. These acts of vandalism were eye-witnessed by members of diplomatic community accredited to Azerbaijan, as well as representatives of international mass media.

The destructive reconstruction of the Yuxarı Gövhər Ağa Mosque in the Şuşa city of Azerbaijan and ancient Azerbaijani Goy Mosque in Armenian capital is a vivid example of Armenia's barbarian cultural heritage policy, intending to erode their authenticity and historical value and claiming that they had never belonged to Azerbaijan. So-called restoration of these mosques is only a pathetic attempt by Armenia to demonstrate its alleged respect for religious values, which is nothing but hypocrisy.

Madame President,

As a home for representatives of many ethnic groups and religions, who have co-existed together peacefully for centuries, Azerbaijan has always abided by its commitment to preserve their cultural heritage and ensure access to and enjoyment of it. The restoration and reconstruction of our historical and religious monuments, including synagogues and churches is an integral part of the cultural policy pursued by Azerbaijan. Preservation of the Armenian Saint Gregory Church in downtown Baku, fully refurbished and remaining under the state protection is a bright example to that policy.

Over the last 20 years, the Russian Orthodox Church (The Church of the Jen-Mironosits Cathedral), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baku or Baku Church of the Savior, and the Alexander Nevsky Russian Orthodox Church in Gəncə have been renovated by the state, and the Orthodox Religious and Cultural Centre of Baku and Azerbaijan Eparchy has been built. Moreover, the restoration of the Chotari Albanian-Udi Church in Gabala and the Orthodox Church in Baku, and the construction of the Church of the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception in Baku were carried out as part of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation's project "Azerbaijan – the land of tolerance". In 2020, within the framework of this project, the Albanian Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Nij settlement of Gabala was thoroughly restored. The Synagogue of Mountainous Jews was built in Baku in 2010 under the patronage of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Ashkenazi Synagogue was built in 2002 with the financial support of the Caucasian Muslims' Board and Baku and Azerbaijan Eparchy.

Azerbaijan reiterates that there should be no doubt that Azerbaijan will continue protecting all cultural and religious heritage in its territory, including by restoring all cultural and religious objects destroyed and vandalized during Armenian occupation. Moreover, Armenians are provided with unhindered access to the cultural and religious sites in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan.

I thank you.