

International Mother Language Day
21 February 2020, 4 p.m.

**Transcript of the remarks by Cecilia Elizalde
Director, Documentation Division,
on behalf of Movses Abelian, Under-Secretary-General
for General Assembly and Conference Management
and UN Coordinator for Multilingualism**

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, 21st of February, marks International Mother Language Day, a day that resonates in all of us as our respective mother tongues constitute a key feature of our individual and collective identities. Mother tongues are not just channels of communication among its present-day speakers, they also connect them to their ancestors and, hopefully, their heirs. They build bridges across space and time and in so doing, they become powerful tools to achieve the ultimate goals of the UN – namely, to save the succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

I am truly honoured today to be given the opportunity to speak to you about the power of mother languages. From the outset, I would to thank Her Excellency Ms. Rabab Fatima for her invitation. While my colleague Ms. Fleming, Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, emphasized on behalf of the UN Secretary-General how our Organization is using languages externally to implement the mandates that we have been entrusted with, I would like to take a moment to underline the importance of translating this ambition into the daily life of the Organization.

Exactly a year ago, with the support of the Office of Human Resources of the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, we launched a Secretariat-wide survey on multilingualism and language skills. The responses that we collected and analysed over the past year revealed that the staff respondents represented a total of 205 distinct mother tongues. They also spoke many other languages in addition to their own. In fact, almost 90% of the staff respondents considered themselves as being bilingual or multilingual. Imagine now if such language skills were fully recognized and nurtured so they can serve the UN and its noble goals. As UN Coordinator for Multilingualism, this is exactly what I am trying to achieve. I aim to foster an organizational culture conducive to multilingualism, as a core value of this Organization, a formidable multiplier, and a tool to achieve the UN's objectives across its three pillars.

As I end on this positive note, I would like to reiterate my gratitude to the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations for hosting these celebrations, again this year. I also want to thank all the Ambassadors and other members of the international community who have attended here today. This clearly demonstrates your commitment to multilingualism and the beauty of mother tongues.

Happy International Mother Language Day! Thank you.