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For immediate release

15 July 2004

Diversity: key to human development in Bangladesh

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) called on national leaders to recognize cultural freedoms as essential for development in Bangladesh during the launch of the 2004 Human Development Report in Dhaka earlier today.

The Report entitled, *Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*, argues that cultural freedom is an essential part of human development because being able to choose one's identity – who one is – without losing the respect of others or being excluded from opportunities, such as work or education, is vital in leading a full life.

"People want the freedom to practice their religion openly, to speak their language, to celebrate their ethnic or religious heritage without fear or ridicule or punishment or diminished opportunity. People want the freedom to participate in society without having to slip off their chosen cultural moorings," said Larry Maramis, UNDP Resident Representative a.i.

In today's world, more than 5,000 different ethnic groups live in approximately 200 countries, says the Report. Bangladesh is among the world's multicultural states, with more than 45 different ethnic groups making up approximately two percent of the national population.

If handled well, cultural diversity can enrich societies but if managed poorly it can quickly become one of the greatest sources of instability within states and between them – and in so doing trigger conflict that takes development backwards.

In his keynote address at the launch, Daily Star editor and cultural expert Mahfuz Anam said that unprecedented advances in communication and information technology has made the world more aware than ever of cultural diversity. Despite this, however, a tendency towards the narrowing of diversity has emerged globally and in South Asia, he said.

Democracy needs to be more inclusive of minorities

The Report notes that democracy can leave minorities out. Mr. Anam said this was the case in Bangladesh where the concerns of ethnic groups are often lost in a democratic system that gives voice to a majority.

The Report offers innovative approaches that would enable minority groups to participate more equally in multicultural societies like Bangladesh said Mr. Maramis. These new multicultural approaches include:



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- ?? **Improved political participation** of minority groups through adoption of 'asymmetric federalism', a system of Governance where some regions have different areas of autonomy than others. Also proportional representation (see pg 55).
- ?? **Ensuring religious freedoms** through an approach where government institutions do not favor one religion over another in (see chapter 3).
- ?? **Legal pluralism** through recognition of customary laws at local level (e.g. Indigenous groups laws regarding use of their natural resources).
- ?? **Inclusive language policies** through official recognition of indigenous languages, bi-lingual education where possible.
- ?? **Multicultural socio-economic policies** such as 'affirmative action' when the disadvantage is collective. Innovative adaptations of affirmative action policies could be used to redress the under-representation of indigenous peoples in the Bangladesh legislatures and other government institutions, for example.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT: Every year since 1990, the UNDP has commissioned the Human Development Report by an independent team of experts to explore major issues of global concern. A worldwide advisory network of leaders in academia, government and civil society contribute data, ideas, and best practices to support the analysis and proposals published in the Report. The concept of Human Development looks beyond per capita income, human resource development, and basic needs as a measure of human progress and also assesses such factors as human freedom, dignity and human agency, that is, the role of people in development. The Human Development Report 2004 argues that development is ultimately "a process of enlarging people's choices," not just raising national incomes. The Human Development Report 2004 is published in English by Oxford University Press.

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