**Address by Zahir Tanin**
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**The United Nations Kosovo Trust-building Forum**
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Good evening, distinguished guests, friends and colleagues,

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to the United Nations Kosovo Trust-building Forum. I thank you for taking the time to join us here in Ljubljana and for your dedication to Kosovo and building trust across communities. I also warmly welcome Assistant Secretary-General Bintou Keita, and my colleagues from the United Nations who have joined us from across Kosovo, including the UN Kosovo Team, Belgrade and New York. I would also like to thank our friends from the European Union, EULEX and, of course, the OSCE.

Today, nearly 19 years after the height of the conflict, the international community continues to support peace, stability, and security in Kosovo. Under a shared legal umbrella, all organisations are mandated and remain committed to working to address the real challenges Kosovo faces, not simply in political negotiations but also at deeper levels – fostering relationships between people and community groups.

This gathering convenes an exceptional group of distinguished leaders, including already-accomplished and emerging people-in-charge. We join together to contribute to fortifying the foundations of an enduring peace and a sustained stable society. We are not here at the negotiating table. The EU-facilitated political dialogue, aimed at the normalisation of relations, and seeking political

agreements between Pristina and Belgrade, is not our focus here.

We are here to identify how, at the social, grassroots-level -- municipal leaders, civil society, and the communities of Kosovo can progress long-lasting trust and mutual cooperation for their own future. Can we assist in cultivating trust and a future that belongs to all? We are here because we believe that the answer is yes, but the main question remains: how? Mistrust across multiple communities in Kosovo still divides many, and prevents them from contemplating mutual efforts aimed at building a shared social platform, rather than unilaterally disarming the other side. The imprint of conflict, and the subsequent waves of violence stays long in the minds of people and continues to complicate the way forward. Even the younger generation, is mostly not able to free itself from carrying inherited perceptions of the time of conflict and violence which occurred even before they were born or could be part of the hostilities. As we know, the history of loss of life, being uprooted and persistent trauma, cannot easily be put aside. People have their own opinions, perceptions and experiences -- they are not simply spectators of conflict. When a war or a conflict breaks out, it takes shape in "the body of different ghouls", the noise of war deafens reason, and people are divided by their views and interpretation of the conflict. This is the foundry of mistrust.

If the organisation of post-conflict political and social life does not or cannot chart out a path for a future acceptable to all, it would be difficult to allow people to breathe, to live, to find the contours of a new coexistence, based on an acceptable, agreed-upon social contract. The work of this Forum, and the numerous meetings held last year and particularly by the focus groups over the last two months, will allow us to identify and better articulate issues of agreement, decipher zones of disagreement and blend the needs and responses in a coherent

pattern, where acceptance, compassion and understanding would help to bring all together.  Without detecting and designing a way forward, fewer people will be able to live in peace and prosperity in either the short or the long term.  It will be difficult to overcome the impact of a sorrow-filled history and to settle the souls of people affected by conflict, but this forum's objective is to create such an agenda, a workable framework to build trust and help guide the future.  Such a framework should capture social, political, cultural, and economic factors; all areas of mutual benefit and mutual interest.  We focus on how to build lasting, sustained trust between all groups of people living in Kosovo, to restore normal relations between groups. This is imperative, as without social reconciliation and building trust, involving people, communities and civil society, despite best efforts and noble intentions for ending wars and conflicts, a post-rickety situation can easily turn critical and lead to a loss in the balance of stability.

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Today the ghastly specter of war and conflict continues to torment the globe. From Ukraine to South Sudan, from Colombia to Libya, from Syria to Yemen, from Iraq to Afghanistan and beyond, we see the brutality of an age of catastrophe. In the past three decades, most of you in this room, and myself included, have lived through turbulent times that inform us from within, not something we learned through books and study. We have all endured tragedies, brought up in a traumatic era, and as we speak, have thus far survived!  For us, this has at times been dispiriting, shocking, painful.

Let me share with you, my own observations and feelings, in a few words:  I was born in peacetime, grew up in tempestuous times, came of age in war and I am

now aging in the atmosphere of unending conflict in my native country and elsewhere. I lived during a number of wars in Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion, and I fled the country when the extremists took over. Waves of infighting destroyed people, country and state. I experienced arrest, torture, and suffered in different phases of war and conflict. I became displaced and homeless; lost everything that I had owned; turned into a refugee; adopted by another country; all despite my own ceaseless efforts to report, to write, and to fight as part of the greater effort to restore normalcy to where I lived. I joined efforts to end a continuous war and unite all groups after 2001, with hope for sustaining peace in a land that suffered immense devastation. Despite our best efforts, I witness, now again, the return of an unremitting war. I suffer, thinking whether or not I will live long enough to see peace and stability in my homeland. My intention is to express, that I understand what it is to survive calamity and the difficulties that must be overcome to build trust in a society in the wake of tragedy. I am no stranger to the pain which people may have experienced in this room; I say this with all my heart.

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Distinguished guests and friends,

War and conflict are not just personal experiences. It is important to know how wars and conflicts affect people and how people can contribute collectively to shape a different future. Let me start with a statement that is obvious: the most recent conflicts in the Balkans were triggered during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 1990s. Paradoxically, the situation followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, in a period of the new optimism, which

some even described as "the end of history". This incongruity shocked many people; the phantoms of conflict were the nightmare of Europe, in stark contrast to idealised hopes after the fall of the communist bloc. Of course, many factors contributed to the disintegration and wars of Yugoslavia, including a crisis of central-federal authority; the rise of nationalism and ethno-nationalism; and economic instability, and I will not try to rehearse the complexity of this history. What is perhaps most relevant today is to highlight that ideologies of the past, such as forming the country within ethnic national boundaries, nurtured new nationalistic movements; and that ethnic nationalism became the essential mobilising force of numerous wars. This pattern echoes in so many post-communist transitions and conflict zones over the last 30 years. Of course, some common misinterpretations from outside attributed Yugoslavia's wars to a unique "Balkan logic" – the "otherness" of the Balkans, with the wrong perception of seeing the region as lacking experience or disinclined toward tolerance. Such prejudiced opinions claimed the region was "not really" Europe that "these people" had killed one another throughout their history. To understand these wars without simplistic prejudices, it is vital to recognise how ethnic-nationalism functions, and acknowledge that ethnicity has become a prominent tool of politics, especially in the post-cold war era.

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As I have described, war and upheaval produce pain, hatred, and the breakdown of human relations. Conflict distorts the past; it breeds intolerance. While we cannot ignore history, what is most important is how we get to recognise and understand it truthfully. We must ensure that we do not reinterpret it at the cost of our present and our future. The past sometimes seems irrecoverable, but the

future can still be imagined and designed. While it is wrong to invite people simply to forget the past, it is right to call for the possibility of a better common life and common future.

Wars and conflicts continue and persist, strangely in a time when humankind arrived at a historical peak of technologies and capabilities to shape the world; this is a paradox that requires collective wisdom and leadership to resolve. Despite the global leaps forward, ethnic-nationalism has become one of the major political factors driving calamity and challenging stability across the world. In our modern history, nationalist and ethno-national factors were behind multiple atrocious conflicts that wrought devastation, destruction, and tragedy.

A recent major study concluded that while only 20% of the wars between 1815 and 1919 resulted from ethno-nationalism; nearly 50% of the wars from 1919 to the start of the 21st century were rooted in ethno-nationalism. In the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union, 75% of all wars and conflicts are classified as largely ethno-national in character. As we can see, the impact of ethno-nationalism and nationalism in modern Europe is historical. As the saying goes, "The chickens of World War I came home to roost," not only in Europe, but also in the Middle East, by the collapse of the multi-ethnic Hapsburg, Ottoman and Russian Empires in 1917-18, embodied in the very nature of the post-war settlements. As one historian has underlined, the essence of this transition was the Wilsonian idea of "self-determination," which determined the remodeling of Europe -- and in different ways Russia and the Middle East -- into ethnic-linguistic territorial states. The Leninist theory of nations, upon which the Soviet Union and later Yugoslavia were constructed, was also essentially the same. As a result, since

1989, we saw 16 new states emerge from the wreckage of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

These days, one can also easily see the identity politics in a combination of ethno-religious activities of Islamist jihadists and others in the Middle East, North Africa and other parts of the world. On the other hand, ethnic diversity does not necessarily result in war, as we can see from the presence of so many diverse ethnic groups in Europe, with a total population over 100 million, who have found a way to peaceful coexistence and prosperity. There are many other examples around the world. It is also telling that identity politics can be managed peacefully if a consensus emerges for a shared narrative of the past, along with a strong will for a collective existence.

What is the solution to deal with the destructive impact of ethnic nationalism as we arrive at this stage of "post-national constellation"? To draw sustenance for coexistence, a changing world requires a different thinking for a new era. We see in some parts of the world, how an egalitarian approach, preserving equal rights and separate identities, namely language and religion, has worked. This outlook has clearly been more effective, better than forcibly addressing the differences, organising a "group" or "groups" at the cost of disorganising the other. Managing difference through acceptable ways for people, including integration can be complex, but doable, and what I believe governments should focus on. I would like to underline the tremendous cooperative tendency of human kind, not to be underestimated; despite the historical facts of brutalities and atrocities by so many.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Achieving societal reconciliation in the aftermath of conflict can be even harder because the relationship between groups has been so severely fractured, not to mention the destruction of institutions.  Moving from societal reconciliation to increasing trust, first and foremost, requires the acceptance of all individuals' rights to co-exist.  If tolerance and compromise cannot easily be achieved in the aftermath of conflict, they can be promoted within the process of trust-building.  The framework of trust-building should focus on fostering understanding and strengthening the means for conflict resolution.  These are achievable objectives when people start to look forward and to free themselves from the burdens of the past.  Enhancing trust between groups requires a strong faith in the need for reconciliation and often the prospect of a larger framework for working together, including among other things: the reinforcement of democratic institutions, free and fair elections, power-sharing, good governance and services, the administration of justice and the rule of law, respect for human rights, and meaningful discourse.

The main important lesson from all conflict is how to make sure that the political agreements will not end up simply as empty shells, leaving the conflict ready to resume at any time.  Based on what we have learned from other global experiences, fostering societal reconciliation and trust-building are central to ensuring violent conflict does not recur.  A widely cited example of this is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission framework of South Africa, a departure from the "victor's justice" concept of Nuremberg after World War II.  This new model focussed on restitution, and not revenge in the face of the violent past, offering its well-known tenet "forgive but not forget".

In fact most significant were the negotiations that ended the Apartheid regime, the Convention for a Democratic South Africa ("CODESA"), which preceded the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Columbia University Professor Mahmood Mamdani, highlighted in his close analysis that the "key to the post-Apartheid transition was not an exchange of amnesty for truth but amnesty for the willingness to reform". It was that central reform that led to a way forward, juridically and politically, post-Apartheid. Mamdani emphasises that the CODESA negotiations changed the perspective of former combatants and led to a progression away from criminalising or demonising the "other" to treating it as a peaceful political adversary. This involved both sides shifting from the best to the second best alternative for both sides in the conflict. In Mamdani's view, this evolution was about different forms of justice and of reconciliation, criminal, political, and social. CODESA, in reality, prioritised political justice that focused on affected groups, whereas criminal justice targeted individuals. That allowed South Africa to move away from Apartheid by turning enemies into political adversaries. Mamdani's view on focusing on political and social justice can provide a helpful basis for prioritisation of the future.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

However, if a people do not want to undermine their future it is more important to re-energise the focus on trust-building before creating a shared narrative of history. For Kosovo, and generally the Western Balkans, it may still be too soon to agree on a shared narrative of history. The focus is now on the present, and on building a better foundation for the future.

The world is big enough to live together and co-exist. We have a responsibility to ensure that our children will not go through the violent moments we have experienced. Let me re-emphasise that there is an intrinsic relation between overcoming mistrust and building trust, if conditions are created and mechanisms made available. A crucial step to overcome mistrust would be to better manage and not seek to eliminate differences, whether between majority or non-majority communities, large or small.

It is a big challenge to find the balance between peace and justice in all post-conflict situations. But in order to avoid any return to conflict and violence, the only answer is to establish a social climate conducive to better understanding, promoting dialogue among all groups, turning enemies into political rivals or even partners, based on acknowledging mutual needs, rights and obligations as well as justice in broad terms: criminal, political, and social. The international community helped the people and communities of Kosovo to take important steps after the height of the conflict: promoting dialogue, understanding, developing grassroots structures for peace, advancing collaborative activities and many more. It is now time to take these efforts to a new level.

Today we embark together on an initiative to build and define a framework for trust and cooperation; we are here to support and advance the endeavor. But, you are the people with the power to make it happen. Leadership is indispensable for success. Leading with compassion, understanding, and clarity is what is need to build a better future, a future which can only be shaped by you. *It's time to organise the future, not simply to mourn the past!*

**END**