Statement by Ms. Farida Shaheed
SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR IN THE FIELD OF CULTURAL RIGHTS

68th session of the General Assembly
Third Committee
Item 69 (b and c): Human rights

24 October 2013
New York
Honourable Chair, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen;

It is with great pleasure that I present my report to the 68\textsuperscript{th} session of the General Assembly. My report this year addresses the issue of the writing and teaching of history, especially in divided and post-conflict societies, with a particular focus on history textbooks (A/68/296).

As a foreword, let me stress that this report is the first of two consecutive studies I have undertaken on historical and memorial narratives. It seeks to identify under which circumstances the historical narrative promoted by the State in schools becomes problematic from a human rights perspective. A second report, to be submitted to the Human Rights Council in March 2014, focusing on memorials and museums, will tackle the wider processes involved in collective memorialization, undertaken by various actors, governmental as well as non-governmental.

I have chosen these subjects because since the establishment of my mandate, and especially during field visits, I have repeatedly received testimonies stressing the importance of historical and memorial narratives as cultural heritage and as crucial for shaping collective identities. People constantly strive to retrieve, validate, make known and have acknowledged by others their own history on the one hand and contest dominant interpretations on the other. I also noted that, all too often, a cultural-rights based approach to transitional justice and reconciliation strategies is not accorded the attention it deserves.

My report concerns divided and post-conflict societies, but in reality, and I’m sure you will agree with me, this means most, if not all, societies, including those that have seen international or internal conflicts in the recent or less recent past; post-colonial societies; societies that have experienced slavery; and societies challenged by divisions based on ethnic, national or linguistic background, religion, belief or political ideology. As you know, controversies surrounding historical narratives may relate to events that took place centuries ago.

In too many places around the world, the historical narratives promoted by States in schools are problematic from a human rights perspective. In promoting nationalistic political agendas and/or monolithic viewpoints of dominant powers, education policies relating to history teaching fail to acknowledge cultural diversity and the multiplicity of historical narratives among and within communities.

It is time to declare explicitly that such policies are at odds with the right to education, the right of all individuals, groups and peoples to enjoy and to have access to their own cultural heritage as well as that of others, the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to information, regardless of frontiers. In many instances, such policies depend on unjustified restrictions on academic freedoms and the promotion of a single history textbook in schools. In the most
acute cases of conflict, such policies can be seen as either the continuation of war in the area of culture and education, or as a means to prepare for revenge in the future. They constitute worrying obstacles to peace-making and peace-building.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

One core message I wish to convey to you today is that history is always subject to differing interpretations. While events may be proven, including in a court of law, historical narratives are viewpoints that, by definition, are partial. Hence, even when the facts are undisputed, conflicting parties may nevertheless fiercely debate moral legitimacy and who was ‘right’ and who was ‘wrong’. Provided that historical narratives rigorously follow the highest deontological standards, they should be respected and included in the debate.

As the past constantly informs the present, history is continuously interpreted to fulfil contemporary objectives by a multiplicity of actors. The challenge is to distinguish the legitimate continuous reinterpretation of the past from manipulations of history for political ends.

History textbooks deserve particular attention. Textbooks require extensive data to be presented in a very limited space, obliging authors to carry out rigorous data selection, and, in the case of elementary grades, to express themselves in just a few sentences. This constraint makes textbooks for younger children a particularly effective — and thus dangerous — tool for promoting ideological messages among young, more susceptible, minds. Younger children are also most vulnerable to the dissemination of fear and prejudice when history teaching is used to lay the foundations for exclusions and even violence, especially towards so-called “bad people”, “enemy nations” or peoples.

My recommendations are therefore grounded in the principle that history teaching should be based on the understanding of history as an academic discipline. It should aim at fostering critical thinking, analytic learning and debate; stressing the complexity of history, it should enable a comparative and multi-perspective approach. It should not serve the purpose of strengthening patriotism, fortifying national identity or shaping the young in line with either the official ideology or the guidelines of the dominant religion.

My report contains a number of recommendations to help States develop such policies. They include, among others, (1) ensuring an appropriate ratio between local, national, regional and global history; (2) ensuring that a wide array of history textbooks are accredited for selection by teachers and enabling teachers to use supplementary teaching materials; (3) raising awareness about manipulations in history textbooks and refraining from encouraging such abuse, and (4) ensuring the continuous education and professional training of history teachers, who are pivotal for promoting a human rights perspective.

Finally, respecting academic freedoms is crucial. History is subject to government control when authorities are not keen on allowing an independent, critical
academic discipline, when they restrict the autonomy of universities and research institutes and infringe upon academic freedoms. States impose a single, politically dictated historical narrative through restrictions affecting the entire process of researching and writing history, in particular the freedom to choose a specific research subject, to have access to archives and specific publications, to work with historians from other countries or groups and to publicize syntheses that challenge a prescribed pattern.

I thank you very much.