

31 January 2018

Secretary-General's remarks at ceremony marking the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust [as delivered]

I would like to start by recognizing the presence of Holocaust survivors.

We thank you for sharing your testimony across the decades.

Let me also express my gratitude to Judge Thomas Buergenthal, a survivor of the ghettos and the death camps who went on to serve the United Nations with great distinction in advancing the cause of international law.

I am also grateful to Mrs. Eva Lavi, the youngest survivor on Schindler's List, who has travelled from Israel to be with us today.

Allow me to offer a short personal reflection.

I have long known that the philosopher Hannah Arendt lived in Portugal from January to May of 1941 during her escape from the Nazis, on her way to the United States.

But I have only just learned that she stayed in a house on the same street where my late first wife lived before we married.

Naturally, I have spent much time in that neighbourhood.

And so I have been quite moved by the thought that my life overlapped, in a way, with that of someone whose work on tyranny and evil had an enormous influence on my own political thinking.

As Prime Minister of Portugal and now as Secretary-General, I have felt it to be my duty to do everything possible to confront anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination.

Eighty-five years ago yesterday, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor.

Four days ago, we marked the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

The gargantuan horror of those 12 years, from 1933 to 1945, reverberates to this day.

The annual Day of commemoration is about the past, but also the future; it is about Jews but also all others who find themselves scapegoated and vilified solely because of who they are.

Today we have two fundamental duties.

First, to remember the Holocaust and its victims.

Second, to be vigilant about hatred today.

Genocide does not happen in a vacuum.

The Holocaust was the culmination of hostility toward Jews across the millennia.

It was planned -- a systematic campaign of extermination. And it was abetted by pseudo-science and propaganda that poisoned millions of minds.

Step by step, social order broke down. A society admired for its heights of cultural achievement lost its moorings and morality.

International order crumbled as well. Societies shattered by the First World War failed to pick up the pieces. The League of Nations proved unsustainable. Borders proved vulnerable to aggression.

And then, utter tragedy – from the Nazi death camps and gas chambers in German-occupied Poland, to the killing fields farther east, known today as the “Holocaust by bullets”.

We must never forget these facts. We must not lose sight of what went wrong.

And since hatred and contempt of human lives are rampant in our time, we must stand guard against xenophobia every day and everywhere.

Across the world, the state of hate is high.

Anti-hate organizations are tracking hundreds of pro-Nazi and white supremacist groups.

Decades after the Holocaust, Nazi symbols and slogans remain chillingly present.

* Just last week, the name of a neo-Nazi political party was spray-painted on a Holocaust memorial.

* Two months ago in one capital, 60,000 people marched while waving signs reading “White Europe” and “Clean Blood”.

* Another recent far-right march – called “Revolt Against the Traitors” by the participants – sought to pass near a synagogue on Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar.

* Last year, neo-Nazis in one country gathered to mark the birthday of Adolf Hitler – and in another to mark the 30th anniversary of the death of one his leading associates, Rudolf Hess.

* Just seven hours’ drive from this city, we have seen marchers saluting Hitler and chanting “blood and soil”.

* One Nazi sympathizer said his dream was of a Europe in 2050, and I quote: “...where the bank notes have Adolf Hitler...” In his twisted logic, he also said that “Hitler will be seen like Napoleon, like Alexander, not like some weird monster who is unique in his own category – no, he is just going to be seen as a great European leader.”

This is outrageous. But this thinking is out there.

We also continue to see efforts to diminish the Holocaust, or deny or downplay the complicity of collaborators or perpetrators.

* A prominent nationalist described a Holocaust memorial as a “monument of shame” and pledged to “rewrite the history books” of the Nazi era.

* Plans to build a statue to a government minister who was involved in persecuting Jews were set aside only after a local and international outcry.

* A new memorial to the Second World War omitted that country's own history of war-time discrimination.

* A leading political figure seemed to question a watershed national consensus accepting responsibility for the country's involvement in the deportation of Jews.

And all the while, neo-Nazis and other such groups are aggressively trying to attract more followers.

* According to the Anti-Defamation League, there has been a sharp increase in recruitment efforts by white supremacists on college campuses – including through targeted hate campaigns against Jews, but also Muslims and others.

* Some national armies have had to step up their efforts to keep neo-Nazis from joining and spreading their messages throughout the ranks.

* In the Internet, for all its wonders, we have seen the newest instrument for spreading the messages of neo-Nazis, white supremacists and other extremist groups.

* The Southern Poverty Law Centre has described one neo-Nazi website as the “murder capital of the Internet” because of the high number of killings attributed to some of its registered users.

* One recent study showed that the number of followers of Nazis and white supremacy groups has grown by 600 per cent since 2012.

* The ease of using the web enables marginal groups to gain outsize visibility

* The anonymity of the web lets racism run wild.

* And malicious automated social media accounts – known as “bots” -- spread the disease further still.

Fortunately, some large tech and social media companies have begun to more actively police their platforms, and to shut down sites or individuals that traffic in incitement to hatred and violence, but this effort needs to be intensified.

Our shared challenge is to ensure that technological advances are a force for good. Not surprisingly, all of this is having an impact.

Anti-Semitic incidents are on the rise. In two countries with large Jewish communities, they increased in 2017 by 60 per cent and 30 per cent respectively.

At the same time, as the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Lord Jonathan Sacks, once said, “The hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews”.

Indeed, today we are seeing a sharp increase in other forms of prejudice.

Anti-Muslim hatred is leading to discrimination, intimidation and assaults.

Hatred is also targeting migrants and refugees – including children.

And at times, we hear things said about certain minorities – about their practices, traditions, holy books – that would never be tolerated if said about majorities or, indeed, about other minorities.

There should be no hierarchies of hatred; all people deserve respect, protection and equality before the law. And all of us have a duty to recognize this right - and to defend it.

Neo-Nazis and their supporters are very actively doing something else that is a source of concern.

They are busily trying to rebrand themselves – to present a kinder and gentler image to win wider appeal.

They choose to seem less crude in order to be more dangerous.

Their goal is clear: as one Nazi apologist has said, it is “to make the mainstream come to us”.

They seek to align with others on the far right to push the boundaries of acceptable conversation farther and farther.

Through a logic of penetration, they seek to infiltrate their slogans, symbols and ideas into more mainstream movements and parties.

Sometimes they employ the tactics of the dog whistle, using words and phrases that may sound benign to the average listener, but are coded in hate.

And they are succeeding. There is a symbiosis at work.

Some parties, in need of votes, are content to give a veneer of respectability to vile ideas.

We must stand together against the normalization of hate.

We must reject those who fail to understand that as societies become multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural, diversity must be seen as a source of richness and not a threat.

Earlier this month, the world mourned the passing of Aharon Appelfeld, the Holocaust survivor and acclaimed author.

When Appelfeld was a boy, he and his family were uprooted from their home and forced to relocate to the ghetto. He once said the following about that experience:

“I noticed that all the doors and windows of our non-Jewish neighbors were suddenly shut, and we walked alone in empty streets. None of our many neighbors, with whom we had connections, was at the window when we dragged along our suitcases”.

We must never be bystanders when lives and values are at stake.

I take heart from the strong reactions against bigotry that we have seen around the world.

I am also encouraged by the teachers and community leaders who are bringing messages of solidarity and mutual respect to younger generations.

The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme, at work in dozens of countries, will continue to be a beacon of memory and education.

At times, hatred may seem to be on the march.

But I firmly believe that with unity, across borders and generations, we can build a world of pluralism and peaceful coexistence – and thereby, at long last, show we are heeding the still-urgent lessons of the Holocaust. Thank you very much.

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2018-01-31/secretary-generals-remarks-ceremony-marking-international-day>