

Secretary-General's remarks to the Park East Synagogue and United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Service

Rabbi Schneier,
Holocaust survivors,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

We meet today online and around the world to commemorate the 76th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, and to honour the memory of the six million Jews and millions of others who were systematically murdered in the Holocaust by the Nazis and their collaborators.

I am particularly privileged to speak to the Holocaust survivors who join us from across the globe, including Rabbi Schneier. You inspire us all with your courage, resilience and endurance.

I have visited the wonderful Park East Synagogue to mark this occasion every year since I became Secretary-General.

Today, we are prevented from gathering together in person by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already cost two million lives and sickened more than ninety million people around the world.

I send my sincere condolences to those who have lost family members, loved ones and friends. I deeply admire the essential and frontline workers who have protected and supported their communities, and particularly the most vulnerable, during these difficult times, risking their own lives.

The pandemic has put societies to the test. It has exacerbated long-standing injustices and divisions. And it has contributed to a resurgence of xenophobia, antisemitism, and hate speech.

Propaganda linking Jews with the pandemic, for example, by accusing them of creating the virus as part of a bid for global domination, would be ridiculous, if it were not so dangerous. This is just the latest manifestation of an antisemitic trope that dates back to at least the 14th century, when Jews were accused of spreading the bubonic plague.

Antisemitism is the oldest, most persistent and entrenched form of racism and religious persecution in our world.

From Imperial Rome to medieval Europe to the modern world, Jews and their communities have suffered two millennia of attacks, expulsions and periodic mass killings. In the 19th century, Jews were blamed for financial crashes in which they themselves were the main victims.

Antisemitism found its most horrific expression in the Holocaust.

The universal revulsion at this crime, followed by the founding of the United Nations and the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, promised an end.

But it did not end.

Antisemitism continues to blight our world.

It is sad, but not surprising, that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered yet another eruption of this poisonous ideology.

We can never let down our guard.

Today, Holocaust denial, distortion and minimization are resurgent.

In Europe, the United States and elsewhere, white supremacists are organizing and recruiting across borders, flaunting the symbols and tropes of the Nazis and their murderous ambitions.

We have seen shocking examples in this nation's capital in recent days.

The Anti-Defamation League found that the American Jewish community experienced the highest level of antisemitic incidents in 2019 since tracking began in 1979.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided new areas for neo-Nazi activities. As people spend more time at home and online, white supremacists and neo-Nazis are using social media platforms to disseminate propaganda and create fear and hatred.

They exploit the anxiety and social turmoil created by the pandemic to target minorities, based on religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, disability and immigration status. They even trade information on how to infect minority communities, by effectively making themselves into bioweapons.

Tragically, after decades in the shadows, neo-Nazis and their ideas are now gaining currency. The United States authorities have warned that white supremacist and nativist movements are on the rise across the country and around the world. For the first time, they have designated white supremacist leaders as terrorists.

In some countries, neo-Nazi ideas can be heard in debates between mainstream political parties. In others, neo-Nazis have infiltrated police and state security services.

While this is horrifying, we can find some reassurance when governments take responsibility and action. What is even more concerning is the certainty that neo-Nazi activities are taking place elsewhere, undetected and unchallenged.

Together, we must urgently strengthen our efforts against the danger they pose.

Distinguished guests, dear friends,

The continued rise of white supremacy and neo-Nazi ideology must be seen in the context of a global attack on truth that has reduced the role of science and fact-based analysis in public life.

These attacks are dangerous and deliberate. Power-hungry, autocratic leaders have always undermined truth, so that they can impose their own narratives based on lies, half-truths and innuendo.

When truth dies, it is far easier to exploit real and imagined differences between groups; invent scapegoats; demonize innocent people and communities; and break the social bonds that unite us all.

The fragmentation of the traditional media, and the growth of social media platforms, are contributing to a proliferation of different narratives with no shared basis of agreed facts.

When the truth is just one version among many, lying becomes normalized and history can be distorted and rewritten.

As the historian Deborah Lipstadt has pointed out, this can alter the way established truth is transmitted from generation to generation so that there is no ultimate historical reality.

When almost two-thirds of young Americans do not know that 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust, we have to ask whether this process is already underway.

This has clear implications for today's commemoration, and for all our activities to educate and inform on the Holocaust.

As the number of Holocaust survivors diminishes every year, we must make ever greater efforts to elevate the truth and ensure that it lives on.

Distinguished guests, dear friends,

The theme of this year's Holocaust observance is "Facing the Aftermath: Recovery and Reconstitution after the Holocaust".

For many Jews, the end of the Holocaust was only the beginning of an unimaginably painful and difficult journey.

To take just one example, Anne Frank's father, Otto Frank, learned that his wife and two daughters had died only after the Holocaust had ended.

No Holocaust survivor could ever recover the life they had led.

The Holocaust changed the world forever; there was no going back.

Today, as we consider the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, we can take important lessons from the Holocaust.

The recovery must address the fragilities and fissures that have been exposed by the pandemic. It must strengthen our mutual bonds, based on our common humanity.

This year must be a year of healing. Healing from the pandemic, and healing our broken societies in which hatred has all too easily taken root.

Recovery must include investment in social cohesion, so that every community feels valued both for itself, and as part of the whole.

Political, religious and community leaders must seek common ground and build consensus, if we are to emerge safely from these dangerous times.

The United Nations strives everywhere to support governments in building inclusive, diverse, respectful societies founded on the human rights and the rule of law. Our blueprint is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.

We need coordinated global action, on the scale of the threat we face, to build an alliance against the growth and spread of neo-Nazism and white supremacy, and to fight propaganda and disinformation.

For the past 15 years, our Holocaust Outreach Programme has carried the testimony of survivors, and its relevance today, around the world. Our written materials and videos inform and raise awareness, because “never again” means telling the story again and again.

Our United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites offers concrete steps to support governments so that all can enjoy their right to observe religious rituals in safety. And our UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech is a demonstration of our commitment to act together against this phenomenon.

Prevention is key to the fight against antisemitism, and I sincerely thank Rabbi Schneier and all those who work with and for the Appeal of Conscience Foundation for their efforts to promote interfaith understanding.

Distinguished guests, dear friends,

History shows that those who undermine truth ultimately undermine themselves.

The only way out of the COVID-19 pandemic is through science and fact-based analysis. The production of vaccines in record time is testimony to the effectiveness of this approach.

There is no vaccine for antisemitism and xenophobia. But our best weapon remains the truth.

The United Nations will continue to stand with you, and against lies, bigotry and hatred of all kinds.

Our best tribute to those who died in the Holocaust is the creation of a world of equality, justice and dignity for all.

Thank you.