

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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SPEECH AT THE MUSEUM OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Tel Aviv, Israel

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[as delivered]

Dear Prime Minister, Ambassador, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

I am honoured to speak to you today after visiting the Museum of the Jewish People, which tells a story stretching over millennia and to all corners of the world.

This remarkably rich mosaic is a Jewish legacy. But it is also an important part of the collective heritage of humanity, a showcase of its highest summits and its lowest depths.

One cannot escape the fact that so many communities, where Jews lived and thrived for centuries, no longer exist because of countless waves of persecution and genocide.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For one of my first speeches as Secretary-General, I took part in the International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony in the UN General Assembly Hall.

The Holocaust was an incomparable tragedy and an incomparable crime in human history.

The world has a duty to remember that the Holocaust was a systematic attempt to eliminate the Jewish people, together with some others.

Let us also recognize that the Holocaust was the culmination of thousands of years of hatred and discrimination targeting the Jews – what we now call anti-Semitism.

I am ashamed that my own country, Portugal, is marred by this history, and I was deeply moved by the eloquent testimony in the museum about the history of Portuguese Jews, their predicament, and their success around the world.

The persecution reached its height with the order by King Manuel I in the 16th century, expelling all Jews who refused to convert. This was a hideous crime that caused tremendous suffering.

But it was also a colossally stupid act that deprived Portugal of much of the country's dynamism and led to prolonged periods of cultural and economic stagnation.

Many Portuguese Jews went to the Netherlands, and we have seen a model of that wonderful building, the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, and they helped that country become one of the 17th century's leading economies and innovators.

When I became Prime Minister in 1995, I felt it was my duty to demonstrate my country's remorse for the Portuguese Inquisition and centuries of merciless attacks against the Jews.

In 1996, the Parliament revoked the letter of expulsion. This was an admittedly symbolic act, but the spirit of repentance was genuine. Several descendants of expelled families have now exercised their right to regain Portuguese nationality.

And I then was able to visit the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam to formally present a copy of that decree and apologize on behalf of my country.

I was impressed, as everybody can be, looking at the model right here, by the beauty of that Synagogue, and moved by what I learned about the vibrancy of Jewish life in the years before the Second World War. But sadly, in the Netherlands too, the Jewish community was almost completely destroyed by the Holocaust. As we have seen again and again, anti-Semitism tends to come back.

After the Holocaust, the founding of the United Nations generated hope that the world could avoid such hatred and violence and would work together to advance equality and human rights for all.

Yet, anti-Semitism and intolerance remain disturbingly widespread.

There are still people who, despite the facts, deny the Holocaust or diminish its scope. There is even a tendency in some countries to rewrite the history around the Second World War and to rehabilitate some of the figures that were themselves involved in the crimes and the tragedy of the Holocaust.

The Internet and social media are filled with hate speech and anti-Semitic imagery.

We hear on the streets of democratic societies the repeating of some of the most vile Nazi chants and charges, just a few weeks ago, "blood and soil" or "the Jews will not replace us".

Today, anti-Semitism, along with racism, xenophobia, anti-Muslim hatred and other forms of intolerance, are being triggered by populism and by political figures who exploit fear to win votes. Immigrants, refugees and minorities across the world are also among the most frequent targets of this animus.

Let me stress that when I talk about anti-Semitism, I include calls for the destruction of Israel. Israel is a Member State of the United Nations. It bears all the responsibilities and enjoys all the rights of every other Member State and, therefore, it must be treated as such.

As Secretary-General of the United Nations, I am determined to do everything I can to stand against anti-Semitism and to all other forms of bigotry and discrimination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Three months from now, we will mark the 70th anniversary of the vote at the General Assembly on the “Partition Plan” that led to the creation of the state of Israel. Seventy years later, however, the promise of peace has not yet been delivered. Decades of conflict have cost thousands of lives and left deep scars in virtually every Palestinian and Israeli family.

The United Nations remains committed to providing Israelis and Palestinians with all possible assistance and support to reach the goal of a comprehensive two-state solution.

I have observed this process over the years with great concern, as someone who cares deeply about this land and its people.

As Prime Minister of Portugal and in other political capacities, I worked with Israeli and Palestinian leaders and was impressed by the genuine desire they have shown to provide a secure and dignified future for their peoples, hoping to see a negotiated solution of two states based on relevant UN resolutions.

Like many here and around the world, I have gone from great hopes about the peace process, to frustration over its stagnation.

It is my deep belief that a two-state solution is the only way forward – the only path towards the historic compromise that can settle this conflict and lead to a better future for all.

That is why I have been, and will continue to be, expressing my disagreement when it’s the case, with unilateral measures and facts on the ground that can or could undermine that solution – including settlement activities, but also continued violence, terror and incitement.

I am well aware of the suspicious polarization and despair that have kept each side from seeing the other as a partner. I am equally cognizant of the political difficulties faced by each side’s political leaders.

Yet I believe there is no alternative to a negotiated solution between the two parties.

It is equally clear that we in the international community cannot simply turn away and allow the situation to deteriorate. We have a role and a responsibility to support the parties in resolving this conflict.

The basic premise has not changed – this land is the ancestral homeland of two peoples.

Both have an undeniable historic and religious bond with it; both have a right to live on it independently and as a free people, as masters of their own fate.

Anyone visiting Israel is left with no doubt that it has fulfilled the rights and national aspirations of Jews throughout generations.

Your country has become renowned worldwide for its great cultural, scientific, technological and scholarly achievements.

We had the opportunity just two days ago to see some remarkable examples of innovation that can be of extreme utility for humankind all over the world in fighting climate change or in accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals.

You have succeeded in protecting your security against many threats, and signing peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and building successful international alliances.

Most importantly, you have created, for the first time in 2,000 years, a home for your people.

It is now overdue that the Palestinians also fulfill their legitimate rights and national aspirations.

I am deeply convinced that, when they do, when they are citizens of their own state, living side by side in peace and security with Israel, Jews will enjoy greater security – as it needs to be guaranteed, prosperity and recognition, and it will be an even greater source of pride for Israelis and for Jews around the world.

I know that many in Israel share this conviction.

Young men and women, including many of you here today, have the power to challenge physical and psychological barriers and seek to build a common future.

Allow me to pay tribute to Palestinians and Israelis who are taking positive actions in their daily lives, often very quietly, to promote tolerance, cooperation and understanding between the two peoples.

I was deeply moved this morning. We visited Nahal Oz, a kibbutz close to the Gaza Strip, that has been bombarded several times and in which one child has been killed by a rocket. I had the enormous pleasure, when talking to the families of the kibbutzim, to note that instead of what would be natural, a feeling of anger in relation to what is an attack on civilians and a violation of international humanitarian law, I have seen from them an extraordinary message of peace and reconciliation, asking us to help the Palestinians in Gaza to overcome their tragic humanitarian problems and being themselves ready to help and to provide support to the Palestinian community in Gaza.

It was a fantastic example of solidarity, of humanity, of tolerance, that I want to pay tribute here publicly today.

The voices of these true peacemakers must not be drowned out by the strident voices and violent actions of the far fewer agents of hate and division.

Let us not forget that those individual peacebuilders represent the best faces of their communities and serve as the human foundation so essential for a lasting peace, here and everywhere.

Thank you very much.