

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS AT UNITED NATIONS HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL CEREMONY

New York, 27 January 2020,

[Bilingual, as delivered]

We meet in the General Assembly of the United Nations today to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, to remember the six million Jews and many others who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust, and to re-commit to preventing any repetition of those crimes.

I extend a special welcome to the survivors here with us today. We are all deeply grateful to them and to all Holocaust survivors, who inspire us with their strength and their example.

Our solidarity in the face of hatred is needed today more than ever, as we see a deeply worrying resurgence in antisemitic attacks around the world, and almost unbelievable, also around us here in New York.

Just thirty miles from here, less than a month ago, a knife attack on a Hannukah party left five people injured at a rabbi's house in the small community of Monsey. That came just a few weeks after the killing of four people at a kosher supermarket in New Jersey.

New York saw a 21 percent rise in antisemitic hate crimes in 2019, part of a trend in cities across the United States.

But, the situation for Jews in Europe is, if anything, worse.

France saw a 74 percent increase in antisemitic attacks in 2018. In the United Kingdom, they rose by 16 percent to a record high.

An attack on a synagogue in the German town of Halle during Yom Kippur last October left two people dead. In Italy, an 89-year-old Holocaust survivor was provided with an armed escort after she suffered a torrent of antisemitic abuse.

We need to name this phenomenon for what it is: there is a global crisis of antisemitic hatred; a constant stream of attacks targeting Jews, their institutions and property.

Almost every day brings new reports of hate crimes. Many of the perpetrators are inspired by previous attacks, glorifying the assailants and creating a self-reinforcing vortex of violence.

Neo-Nazis and white supremacists are resurgent, organizing themselves and spreading their poisonous ideology and iconography online. The internet, from social media to online gaming platforms and the dark web, is their playground and their recruiting office. They manipulate video content and poison young minds.

This upsurge of antisemitism cannot be seen in isolation from an extremely troubling increase in xenophobia, homophobia, discrimination and hatred in many parts of the world, targeting people on the basis of their identity, including race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, disability and immigration status.

Attacks against religious minorities are a particular concern. Around the world, we have seen Jews murdered in synagogues, their gravestones defaced with swastikas; Christians killed at prayer, their churches torched; and Muslims gunned down in mosques, their religious sites vandalized.

As the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Jonathan Sacks, has said: “The hate that begins with Jews never ends there.”

Seventy-five years ago today, when the soldiers of the Soviet army entered Auschwitz, they were stunned into silence by what they saw. The Nazis’ efforts to hide their crimes were undermined by the clear evidence of millions of pieces of clothing and tons of hair. To quote Primo Levi, the liberators felt “guilt that such a crime should exist”.

Like the soldiers, we are revolted by the horrific details of Auschwitz. But it is our duty to look and to continue looking; to learn and to relearn the lessons of the Holocaust, so that it is never repeated.

The most important lesson is that the Holocaust was not an aberration committed at a particular moment in history by a few unspeakably sick people.

It was the culmination of millennia of hatred, from the Roman Empire to the pogroms of the Middle Ages. My own country, Portugal, committed an act of utter cruelty and stupidity by expelling its Jewish population in the end of the fifteenth century.

European Jews were excluded from almost all areas of economic activity; scapegoated if they succeeded; and defined as inferior. One scheme put forward decades before Hitler’s rise to power involved shipping all eastern Europe’s Jews to the African island of Madagascar.

When I visited Yad Vashem two years ago, I was appalled once again by the ability of antisemitism to reinvent itself and reemerge over millennia.

It takes new forms; it may be spread by new techniques; but it is the same old hatred. We can never lower our guard.

And far from being the project of a few insane individuals, the Nazi attempt to exterminate Jews and other vulnerable people involved architects, scientists, doctors, lawyers, engineers, drivers, bureaucrats, soldiers. Millions of ordinary people were desensitized to crimes against humanity taking place around them, often described by euphemisms like “special measures”.

As the great writer Hannah Arendt said, most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.

The Holocaust was a complex operation arising from long-held prejudices and required the corruption of society from top to bottom; the corruption of language; of education and political discourse.

As we work to live up to the promise of “Never again”, we need to examine our own prejudices; guard against the misuse of our own technology; and be alert to any signs that hatred is being normalized.

Prejudice and hatred thrive on insecurity, frustrated expectations, ignorance and resentment. Populist leaders exploit these feelings to whip up fear, in pursuit of power.

When any group of people is defined as a problem, it becomes easier to commit human rights abuses and to normalize discrimination against them.

Combating prejudice requires leadership at all levels that fosters social cohesion and addresses the root causes of hatred.

It requires investment in all parts of society, so that all can contribute in a spirit of mutual respect.

Promoting social cohesion and human rights, and addressing discrimination and hatred are among the overriding aims of the United Nations, through our efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Decade of Action I launched last week is aimed at stepping up support for countries around the world to build inclusive, diverse, respectful societies that provide lives of dignity and opportunity for all.