‘Hold fast to our common humanity’: UN marks 80 years since death camps were liberated

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27 January 2025 - Hate continues to grow at an alarming speed, and the world must do more to fight growing antisemitism the UN Secretary-General said on Monday, honouring the victims of the Holocaust and those who survived the Nazi death camps.

More than 15 months on from the 7 October terror attacks by Hamas in Israel, António Guterres said the UN will continue doing its “utmost to ensure it leads to the release of all hostages – since the beginning we have asked for the unconditional and immediate release of all hostages – and to a permanent ceasefire in Gaza”.

Every year on the day the concentration camps were liberated in 1945, the world unites to honor the memory of the six million Jews who perished at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators, a commemoration that also extends to the Roma and Sinti communities, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and all others who suffered from the systemic violence, torture, and genocide of the Nazi regime.
Lessons must never be forgotten

In the presence of Israel’s President Isaac Herzog in the General Assembly Hall, the Secretary-General underscored the need for remembrance and emphasized that the lessons of the Holocaust must never be forgotten.

This year’s commemoration marks a milestone: 80 years since the Holocaust’s end, and 80 years of efforts to preserve the memory of its victims.

Underlying the courage of survivors in sharing their stories to ensuring that the horrors of Auschwitz-Birkenau and other concentration camps are never erased from history, Mr. Guterres added that the responsibility to ensure this history is never forgotten “belongs to every one of us”. “Remembrance is not only a moral act – remembrance is a call to action”, he said.

Combat hatred

As part of the United Nations' ongoing efforts to combat hate speech, the commemoration highlighted the importance of educating future generations about the atrocities committed during the Holocaust.

Highlighting the acclaimed writer Primo Levi’s words – an Auschwitz survivor, who urged humanity to “carve the knowledge into our hearts” – Mr. Guterres called on everyone to “speak-up against hate”, stand-up for the human rights of all, and “make those rights a reality”.

Defend human rights

The UN is committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was established in the wake of the Holocaust. In 1948, nations around the world united to affirm the inherent dignity and equality of all people, a direct response to the horrors of Nazi ideology.

Reminding that the document is a “pure expression of our shared humanity”, the UN chief said that “in dark times it remains a shining light”.

“Today, our world is fractured and dangerous”, Mr. Guterres warned once more – “80 years since the Holocaust’s end, antisemitism is still with us - fuelled by the same lies and loathing that made the Nazi genocide possible. And it is rising.”

Efforts to combat the growing tide of Holocaust denial, discrimination, and hate are also central to the United Nations, which has recently launched an Action Plan on Antisemitism to enhance its efforts to educate, promote truth, and resist efforts to distort historical facts.

Calling for widespread condemnation of antisemitism “wherever and whenever it appears”, Mr. Guterres said that promoting education, combating lies and speaking the truth are key – and that in days of division, all must “hold fast to our common humanity”.

“We will never forget. And we will never waver in that fight”, the UN chief concluded, leaving the podium to the survivors who were there to share their memories.

Prayer for peace

Israel’s President Isaac Herzog told the commemoration that “it is time to acknowledge challenging our right to exist is not diplomacy, it is plain antisemitism.”

He said 80 years after the Holocaust, he stood in the General Assembly “with deep faith and hope. Our nation rose from the flames of the crematorium not to live forever by the sword, but to build, to repair, to add light, to heal.”

He added that he hoped peace agreements could be reached between Israel and its neighbours across the region “with all peoples of the Middle East, Israelis, Palestinians and all others”, living peacefully side by side.

On this historic day, we must commit to joining hands to defeat darkness and hatred and work together to ensure building of a shared future. This is the vow we must share. All of us. The family of nations - that what happened once will never happen again.”

Roma survivor

Dumitru Miclescu, Roma survivor of the Holocaust, flew from Budapest to participate at the ceremony in General Assembly Hall on Monday.

Supported by his niece Izabela Tiberiade, he told his story: “I am here not just for myself, but for all the Roma who suffered during the Holocaust and did not have the chance to be heard.”

A survivor of the terror camps in Transnistria, he was forced into trains and deported when he was just an eight-year-old boy in Romania, along with his family.

Building a world without racism

“I will never forget those moments when we were gathered into the trains. Many people died on the trains before we even arrived. Those who reached the concentration camps suffered even more: forced labor, starvation, disease, and constant terror. Death was a daily presence,” he said.

Acknowledging the lack of support for the few Roma who survived and returned home, Mr. Miclescu said that being at the UN was “an important step toward recognizing history” but there

was still much to be done.

“Allow me to say to all the young people listening to my story: I ask you to learn about your history. I hope you will build a world without racism,” he concluded.

Never forget

Marianne Muller who was just a baby during the Holocaust, also took the podium to share her family’s story. Accompanied by her four children and grandchildren, she said: “they are my personal answer to Hitler”.

Stressing that antisemitism is rising all over the world, Ms. Muller called on the world to remember that the Holocaust and its horrors “all happened only 80 years ago.”

‘Don’t be neutral towards human suffering’

At a ceremony in Geneva, Nazi death camp survivor Ivan Lefkovits shared harrowing testimony of his experiences on Monday to mark Holocaust Remembrance Day, with a timeless message for present and future generations: “Don’t be neutral, especially not towards human suffering.”

Recalling the murder of his father and brother, both victims of Hitler’s mission to wipe out Jews, 88-year-old Mr. Lefkovits noted that many European countries subscribed to the Nazi leader’s views.

Mr. Lefkovits was seven years old when he was sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp in November 1944; he spent the last months of the war in Bergen-Belsen camp, where he almost died from starvation and thirst.

Today he urges younger generations to study history “not necessarily to learn, but to understand” why the Holocaust happened.

Source: United Nations.