



Social Cohesion Must Be Strengthened to Make Diversity ‘a Plus, Not a Threat

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Following are UN Secretary-General António Guterres’ remarks at the observance ceremony marking the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, in New York, 27 January, 2017:

Today is a day to remember, reflect and look forward. We are here to honour the victims of the Holocaust, an unparalleled crime against humanity. We are together to mourn the loss of so many and of so much.

The world has a duty to remember that the Holocaust was a systematic attempt to eliminate the Jewish people and so many others.

I am humbled by the presence here today of Holocaust survivors. Thank you for bearing witness across seven decades so that others may live in dignity. There is no better education for the future than the guarantee that we will always be able to remember the past and to honour the victims of the tragedies of that past.

I would like to pay tribute to one survivor in particular, Elie Wiesel, who passed away last year. He became one of the world’s most passionate voices for mutual respect and acceptance, and the United Nations was proud to have him as one of our Messengers of Peace.

It would be a dangerous error to think of the Holocaust as simply the result of the insanity of a group of criminal Nazis. On the contrary, the Holocaust was the culmination of millennia of hatred and discrimination targeting the Jews — what we now call anti-Semitism.

Imperial Rome not only destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, but also made Jews pariahs in many ways. The attacks and abuse grew worse through the triumph of Christianity and the propagation of the idea that the Jewish community should be punished for the death of Jesus — an absurdity that helped to trigger massacres and other tremendous crimes against Jews around the world for centuries to come.

The same happened in my own country, Portugal, reaching its height with the order by King Manuel I. in the sixteenth century expelling all Jews who refused to convert. This was a hideous crime and an act of enormous stupidity. It caused tremendous suffering to the Jewish community — and deprived Portugal of much of the country’s dynamism. Before long, the country entered a prolonged cycle of impoverishment.

Many Portuguese Jews eventually settled in the Netherlands. Lisbon’s loss was Amsterdam’s gain, as the Portuguese Jewish community played a key role in transforming the Netherlands into the global economic powerhouse of the seventeenth century.

The Portuguese example also demonstrates that anti-Semitism, more than a question of religion, is essentially an expression of racism. The proof is that the converted Jews, the so-called “new Christians”, faced discrimination by the old Christians, and suffered continued persecution by the

Portuguese Inquisition.

When I became Prime Minister [of Portugal] in 1995, I felt it was absolutely necessary, even if only with a symbolic gesture, to demonstrate my country's rejection and repentance of Portugal's merciless attacks against the Jewish community.

In 1996, Parliament revoked the letter of expulsion. I then had the honour of visiting the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam to formally present a copy of that decree and apologize on behalf of my country. Tragically, that beautiful synagogue was almost empty, because the community Portugal had expelled was almost completely destroyed by the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism always tends to come back.

Portugal recently adopted a law allowing the descendants of those expelled in the sixteenth century to regain Portuguese nationality. Last year, more than 400 took advantage of this offer.

I am also very proud to note that just a few weeks ago, my wife signed, on behalf of the Lisbon Municipality, an agreement with the Jewish Community of Lisbon to establish the Lisbon Jewish Museum. This will be a way to pay tribute to the memory of those my country mistreated so badly.

History keeps moving forward, but anti-Semitism keeps coming back. The renowned scholar Simon Schama has noted that in the nineteenth century Jews were even blamed for modernity, including for disasters of international finance in which they themselves were among the first victims.

Schama also noted that Jews often faced a lose-lose situation. When they successfully integrated and came to “look like” anyone else, they became subjects of suspicion. Others who looked different were blamed for that, too. Both groups came together in the Nazi crematoria.

After the Holocaust, the world seemed eager to find a more cooperative path. The founding of the United Nations was one expression of that moment. The United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention enshrined a commitment to equality and human rights.

Humankind dared to believe that tribal identities would diminish in importance. We were wrong. Those like me who grew up in the post-war era never imagined we would again face rising attacks on Jews in my own part of the world — in Europe.

Anti-Semitism is alive and kicking. Irrationality and intolerance are back. But we still see Holocaust denial, despite the facts. There is also a new trend of Holocaust revisionism, with the rewriting of history and even the honouring of disgraced officials from those days.

Hate speech and anti-Semitic imagery are proliferating across the Internet and social media. Violent extremist groups use anti-Semitic appeals to rouse their forces and recruit new followers. All this is in complete contrast to tolerance, the primacy of reason and universal values. Moreover, as the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Lord Jonathan Sacks, said last year, “The hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews.”

Today, we see anti-Semitism, along with racism, xenophobia, anti-Muslim hatred and other forms of intolerance, triggered by populism. I am extremely concerned at the discrimination faced by minorities, refugees and migrants across the world.

I find the stereotyping of Muslims deeply troubling. A “new normal” of public discourse is taking hold, in which prejudice is given a free pass and the door is opened to even more extreme hatred.

Steps from this chamber, you will find a powerful exhibition on Nazi propaganda. It is called “State of deception” and is the product of our fruitful partnership with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

As this exhibition details, propaganda helped erode the bonds of humanity. The word “Jewish” was used constantly in association with society’s ills. Hardship and instability created fertile ground for scapegoating. It is true that many citizens disapproved of discrimination. But a majority accepted such sentiments, even if only passively. Ultimately, indifference prevailed, dehumanization took hold, and the descent into barbarity was quick.

These are lessons for our time, too. We need to be vigilant. We need to invest in education and youth. We need to strengthen social cohesion so that people feel that diversity is a plus, not a threat.

The United Nations itself must do more to strengthen its human rights machinery, and to push for justice for the perpetrators of grave crimes. Our “Together” campaign is focusing on countries hosting refugees and migrants. Our Holocaust Outreach Programme is active on all continents.

The Holocaust also saw great acts of heroism, from ordinary people who protected others to diplomats who, at grave risk to themselves, defied the Nazis to enable thousands of people to escape certain death. Some of these are well known — Sweden’s Raoul Wallenberg and Japan’s Chiune Sugihara. Some are less so — Iran’s Abdol Hossein Sardari and, I am proud to say, Portugal’s Consul in Bordeaux, Aristides de Sousa Mendes.

Today, we can be inspired by many cooperative efforts to bring diverse groups together. We need to deepen this solidarity.

After the horrors of the twentieth century, there should be no room for intolerance in the twenty-first.

I guarantee you that as Secretary-General of the United Nations, I will be in the frontline of the battle against anti-Semitism and all other forms of hatred.

That is the best way to build a future of dignity and equality for all — and the best way to honour the victims of the Holocaust we will never allow to be forgotten.

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