

20 January 2018

Secretary-General's remarks at Ceremony marking the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust

This year marks the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht – the night of broken glass, on which so many Jewish synagogues, shops and other centers of life were destroyed.

Rabbi Schneier has spoken movingly of how as a young boy of eight, he saw his temple in Vienna attacked and in ruins. As terrible as that night was, we know it was a warning sign of far worse to come. And so on this day, we have two fundamental duties.

The first is to remember the utter evil and systematic attempt to eliminate the Jewish people. Our second duty is to be ever watchful of dark clouds on the horizon. After all, the Holocaust did not happen in a vacuum. It was the culmination of hatred and hostility toward Jews across the millennia. We remember the pogroms dating back centuries. The rise to power in the 20th century of Nazi racists filled with resentment. The adoption of laws that enshrined discrimination against Jews and so many others. The propaganda that poisoned millions of minds. The ghettos, expulsions and round-ups. Step by step, social order broke down and people were drawn in – as perpetrators, as passive supporters, as victims.

All of us today have a special obligation. An obligation to never lose sight of what went wrong and how it happened. And an obligation to be ever vigilant in the face of persistent anti-Semitism and other forms of hate in our time. As I scan the global landscape today, I am sorry to say that the state of our world is messy.

And the state of hate is high. Almost eighty years after the fall of the Nazi regime, its symbols, mindsets and language are very much with us.

Some still seek to deny or diminish the fact of the Holocaust. Others downplay the complicity of their citizens and former political leaders. And we see example after example of the rise of the neo-Nazi threat. Anti-hate organizations are now tracking hundreds of pro-Nazi and other such groups.

With just a little research, we were able to quickly identify 65 groups in 25 countries. These are located not just in Europe and North America but in every region of the world. Their followers – and the “likes” they receive on social media – number in the tens of thousands.

Sixty thousand people marched recently in one country in support of the continent’s far right movements, with placards reading “White Europe” and “Clean Blood”.

The neo-Nazi group called “Combat 18” has re-emerged, including through a concert in a European country attended by thousands

A recent far right march – called “Revolt Against the Traitors” by the participants – sought to march near a synagogue on Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar.

Last year, hundreds of neo-Nazis gathered to mark the 30th anniversary of the death of Rudolf Hess, one of Hitler’s leading associates.

A prominent nationalist in one European country described a Holocaust memorial as a “monument of shame” and pledged to “rewrite the history books” of the Nazi era.

In another, a leading figure questioned the national consensus accepting responsibility for the country’s involvement in deporting Jews.

In yet another, plans to build a statue to a government minister who persecuted Jews were set aside only after alarm bells went off around the world.

Another new memorial to the Second World War omitted the country’s own history of collaboration with the Nazis and persecution of the Jews.

At one far-right gathering commemorating a wartime battle, a neo-Nazi delivered a speech in which he claimed that as a result of the end of the Hitler regime “darkness fell on Europe”.

On college campuses, recruitment efforts of white supremacist Nazi sympathizers are on the rise.

On the internet, the white nationalist online ecosystem is phenomenally larger than any other extremist groups.

Some national armies have had to step up their efforts to keep neo-Nazis from joining and spreading their messages through the ranks. And just a few hours’ drive from this nation’s capital, we have seen marchers praising Hitler and chanting “blood and soil”.

Not surprisingly, all of this is having an impact.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, anti-Semitic incidents in the United States rose 67 per cent last year. In United Kingdom, they rose by 30 per cent. Hate Moving from Margins to Mainstream.

Neo-Nazis and their supporters are very actively doing something else that is a source of concern. They are busy trying to rebrand themselves.

To come across somehow as something different – as kinder and gentler to win wider favor. They are less crude and more dangerous. Their goal is clear: as one said, “to make the mainstream come to us”.

To align with others on the far right to push the boundaries of acceptable conversation farther

and farther.

And it's working. Hard core extremists have been described as being unable to contain their glee at the newly opened doors to their hateful ideas. They sometimes seek to falsely claim that they have no problem with Jews, their target is the other group, the other religion, the other minority.

Scratch the surface and we see their true essence. One member of a growing global movement of millions said his dream was of a Europe in 2050:

“...where the bank notes have Adolf Hitler, Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great. And Hitler will be seen like that: like Napoleon, like Alexander, not like some weird monster who is unique in his own category — no, he is just going to be seen as a great European leader.”

Whenever and wherever humanity's values are abandoned, we are all at risk.

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

We must stand together against the normalization of hate. We must stand up to political opportunists who profit by scapegoating and vilification.

We must reject those who fail to understand that as societies become multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural, diversity must be seen as a source of richness and not a threat. Need for Education and Leadership.

The theme of this year's Holocaust Remembrance Day highlights the importance of education as a shared responsibility.

The United Nations and the Holocaust Outreach Programme will continue to do its part. Leaders across the board must step up.

Words matter.

It matters what leaders say. It matters what kind of example is set by public officials from mayors to ministers to heads of state.

As Rabbi Schneier has said, all of us have a responsibility to act against indifference.

We must never be bystanders when lives and values are at stake.

Let us stand up to hatred. Let us work together to build a world of pluralism, mutual respect and coexistence for all.

Thank you.