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Chairman ITF

Statement for the ITF at the occasion of the Round Table commemorating the
November Programs of 1938 in Vienna

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are all taken by the words of Yehuda Bauer. He impressively reminded us of the importance of what we are commemorating today, 70 years after the terrible night of the program against the Jews of Austria and the entire Hitler Germany. As we see in the Holocaust an unprecedented historic genocidal event and, indeed, the paradigmatic genocide, we are, of course concerned what humanity can do in order to save the world from similar crimes against humanity happening in the future? Therefore, to research, to communicate, to educate about, and to commemorate the ideological framework, the developments and the events paving the way to the Holocaust that indeed largely destroyed the European Jewry, have become a primary task for all societies that strive for peace and a future without such tragedies perpetrated by humans and done to humans.

It was the night 70 years ago that showed that the Holocaust was not only the work of an isolated group of cold blooded Nazi forces but it was supported, accepted, condoned, watched or turned a blind eye at by a good part of the society. The flames devouring synagogues and prayer houses, the breaking glass and doors of thousands of Jewish Shops and homes, the looting, the shouting, the chanting by the unleashed hordes of Nazis and their supporters, the cynical laughter of the perpetrators or onlookers of acts of utter humiliation to our fellow Jewish citizens – should n't they keep ringing forever in our as a warning of what human beings can do to other human beings?

Do we need a more tragic warning to continuously draw our lessons from? This is the focus of the work of the International Holocaust Taskforce, ITF, which I have the honor to speak for as its present Chair.

In the late 1990ies several European societies became conscious of the irritating fact that many among the young generation would be partially or even totally unfamiliar with the term Holocaust. As a result, the then Swedish Prime Minister Persson established, together with the United Kingdom and the United States as the first partners, the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF). This he did out of his conviction that the Holocaust and the lessons learned from the Holocaust should never be forgotten.

Point of departure was the destruction of Europe's Jewish population and the lessons to be drawn, today, from this unspeakable disaster. By the end of 1998, the first five countries' delegations held a meeting in Washington, where they reiterated their commitment to encourage parents, teachers as well as civic, political and religious leaders to undertake, with renewed vigor and attention, Holocaust education, remembrance and research, with a special focus on their own countries' histories. Other countries were called upon to strengthen their efforts in these fields and to undertake new ones where necessary. Today, ten years later, the Task Force has 25 member states and a number of states intending or being already on the way of becoming new members.

Our work is based on the "Stockholm Declaration". The Declaration was proclaimed at "The Stockholm International Forum on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research" on 26-28 January 2000 in presence of the representatives of 46 States. Let me remind you of its central message that reads as follows:

"The Holocaust (Shoah) fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilization. The unprecedented character of the Holocaust will always hold universal meaning. [...] With humanity still scarred by genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, the international community shares a solemn responsibility to fight those evils. Together we must uphold the terrible truth of the Holocaust against those who deny it. We must strengthen the moral commitment of our peoples, and the political

commitment of our governments, to ensure that future generations can understand the causes of the Holocaust and reflect upon its consequences. We pledge to strengthen our efforts to promote education, remembrance and research about the Holocaust, both in those of our countries that have already done much and those that choose to join this effort. We share a commitment to encourage the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions. We will promote education about the Holocaust in our schools and universities, in our communities and encourage it in other institutions. We share a commitment to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and to honor those who stood against it. We will encourage appropriate forms of Holocaust remembrance, including an annual Day of Holocaust Remembrance, in our countries.”

The ITF is well equipped to effectively pursue these objectives. Some of the world’s leading experts representing the most prominent international institutions in the field of education, remembrance and research are uniting in the ITF’s six Working Groups and function as a unique network of international cooperation. Through our programs, teachers, students and the society as a whole, throughout our member countries and beyond, are sensitized and learn about the Holocaust and the lessons to be drawn from it for present and future generations. Academics have been enabled to conduct research on the highest level. Our efforts to mobilize support and expertise for Holocaust memorials have added to the culture of Holocaust remembrance. Special working groups focus on the Genocide against the Roma as well as on the Holocaust and other genocides.

At this stage a few characteristics about the ITF structure should be given: Headed by its actual Austrian chairmanship, the Task Force consists on the one hand of representatives of governments of the member countries. Non Governmental Organizations are part of the delegations and nominated by them, serving as their experts and participating in the working groups. Professor Yehuda Bauer, the Academic Advisor of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, who has just delivered today’s key note statement, is the Task Force’s Honorary Chairman. Professor Dina Porat, head of the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism at Tel Aviv University serves as the Academic Adviser to the ITF. Already in 1998 it was determined that decisions in the ITF would be taken by consensus.

The plenary of the ITF is its principal decision making body that meets twice a year. The chairmanship rotates on a voluntary basis once a year. It is prepared by the Strategic Implementation Working Group.

The ITF's six working groups undertake the substantial cooperation among the ITF's network of experts in the different fields of operation of the ITF.

Since Education is the key to a successful implementation of the Stockholm Declaration the work of the Education Working Group (EWG) is of pivotal importance. It provides links and networks to enhance educational projects and supports governments and educational institutions in member states in their educational activities governed by the Task Force's overall aims. The Task Force also extends support to all efforts towards intensifying teacher training in Holocaust and genocide studies in order to prepare future teachers to disseminate this knowledge among their pupils.

The Academic Working Group supports ongoing academic research in the field of the Holocaust in all its aspects in order to help us draw the right lessons from this tragedy.

The principal aim of the Memorials and Museums Working Group is to help the Task Force mobilize support and expertise for Holocaust memorials and related places of memory in keeping with the Stockholm Declaration.

Let me just mention some documents that have been developed by the ITF working groups as practical tools:

- **Why** Teach About the Holocaust? **What** to Teach About the Holocaust? **How** to Teach About the Holocaust
- Guidelines for Study Trips to Holocaust-Related Authentic and Non-Authentic Sites
- Revised Guidelines on Visiting Holocaust-Related Sites.

ITF by its very nature is particularly concerned with tendencies of diminishing or denial of the Holocaust. Today ITF carries its mission even beyond its own geographical range of membership. At the same time we feel that there is a need for further addressing issues of present-day revisionism, Anti-Semitism and extremism. By trying to increase the knowledge about the unprecedented crime of the Holocaust against the European Jews and its roots, the principle aim of the work of ITF is to help preventing any crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide from happening now and in the future.

The principle target group of ITF are the young generations that lack the terrible experience of the Holocaust and the developments leading to it. Not only will this require more in depth research, but also a greater preparedness to accept more political responsibility against denial of the Holocaust as well as against revisionist tendencies.

Therefore one of the main goals of the Austrian Chairmanship is to improve medial outreach by renewing the ITF-Website, which also serves as an open accessible resource for mainstreaming Holocaust education, remembrance and research. Thereby ITF makes its tools accessible for the general public. Also, we are keen to deepen the links between ITF and international bodies with similar objectives.

Indeed, gaining knowledge about and dealing with the Holocaust has to be continuously mainstreamed. Of course, this is not a goal in itself. Humanity drew its lessons from the Holocaust when drafting the Genocide Convention that marked the beginning of all international efforts to prevent impunity for crimes against humanity. The Human Rights Declaration of 1948, the basis for all UN Human Rights Instruments and the European Convention on Human Rights adopted by the Council of Europe Member States were efforts to save humanity from the experience of the Holocaust for the generations to come. This calls for broader communication strategies with the aim of having Holocaust remembrance generally accepted as a tool to promote the consciousness of the importance of protecting and further developing the human rights and, most of all, human dignity. Ladies and Gentlemen the most terrible and intended effect of the Holocaust starting with the 1938 programs was depriving citizens of their human dignity just for being Jews. This is the very

source of all evils threatening humanity: the lack of respect for the other human being.

I am therefore most grateful that on this solemn day of remembrance we find ourselves united here in sharing our objectives and our experiences. We really hope that this event, which takes place for the first time in such a broad international framework will help our organizations, who all have priorities in using the culture of the memory of the Holocaust, to join hands in order to save humanity from similar developments in the future.

In this spirit, the ITF is interested in concluding instruments promoting cooperation and co-ordination. Today we will have the honour sign a letter of intent about future cooperation between the Council of Europe and ITF with the Right Hon Terry Davis, Secretary General of the that organization. We hope that similar efforts to increase the cooperation among us will follow. We are convinced that the ITF comprises unique resources of expertise and experience that should be able to add considerable added value to all organizations recognizing the importance of and engaged in Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research.

Originally, the ITF was intended as flexible group of governments supporting educational and other efforts relating to the Shoah of the Jewish people. But now significantly extending its geographical range and its workload, the ITF increasingly develops qualities of an international organisation. There are more governments seeking membership, and this is both a blessing and a challenge. The ITF only accepts democratic governments for membership, and procedures have been developed with conditions that have to be fulfilled in order to join. These and other organizational procedures can be studied by visiting the ITF website. Another major result of the work of the ITF has been a much closer cooperation between the major institutions commemorating and teaching about the Holocaust, such as Yad Vashem in Israel, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, the Auschwitz Museum at Oswiecim, the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, the Terezin Pamatnik in the Czech Republic, the Memorial de la Shoah in Paris, and many others; parallel to this, hundreds of teachers and other experts got to know, appreciate, and learn from, each other.

This calls for structural changes as well as institutional stabilization. Important steps to this end have already been taken. The Permanent Office with its headquarters in Berlin took up its activities in March 2008 and is on its way to become the focal point of the Task Force. In autumn of 2007 in Amsterdam a new process was initiated for meeting the new structural challenges to the ITF. This process is being carried on and will have to be further developed by the Chairs to come, thus reflecting the ongoing substantial and institutional development that ITF is about to undergo.

If you ask me, what are the prospects for a successful future for the ITF, I would like to quote you, dear Professor Bauer. Once you said: "It seems that there is a good chance – but no guarantee, of course, that the Holocaust, the paradigmatic genocide, will serve as a warning to all human societies, and that therefore organizations such as the ITF can fulfill a major role in spreading education, both on a cognitive and on an emotional and moral basis, among larger and larger audiences. There are obstacles that have to be overcome: fatigue in dealing with the topic, political problems, pedagogical issues, and others. But if people are permitted to forget the warning, the danger that genocides such as the Holocaust, the most extreme case of a general malady, can be repeated, will inevitably grow. The ITF is dedicated to prevent this."