

**Statement of the Chair of the Task Force for International Co-operation on
Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, Ambassador Tom Vraalsen, at
the Holocaust Era Assets Conference Prague 28 June 2009**

Mr. Chairman,

Honorable delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

By the end of 1998 delegations from five countries held a meeting in Washington D. C. concurrently with the first Holocaust Era Assets Conference.

Inspired by the ongoing deliberations in that conference they declared their commitment “to encourage parents, teachers and civic, political and religious leaders to undertake with renewed vigor and attention Holocaust education, remembrance and research”. Other countries were called upon to strengthen their efforts in these fields and undertake new ones where necessary.

This was the birth of what has become “The Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF)”. I believe it is right to say that the Task Force is a true child of the environment and political atmosphere created by the first Holocaust Era Assets Conference.

The Washington Conference initiated restitution processes in many countries. Time has come for revitalizing this work. Not only because of economic restitution, but because compensation is based on acceptance of responsibility.

Convinced that Holocaust and the lessons learned from it should never be forgotten, Former Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson invited the members of the ITF and other interested governments to participate in “The Stockholm International Forum on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research” in January 2000. The outcome was a message for the future. It

highlighted mutual understanding as one of the important lessons to be learned from the Holocaust. It underlined the responsibility of the international community to fight the evils of genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia. This document, The Stockholm Declaration, became the basis document for ITF. This is still the case.

This week we successfully concluded the summer Plenary Meeting of ITF in Oslo. The membership stands at 27 countries. Seven more countries are officially affiliated with ITF. Still others are looking to join. The growth in membership and the fact that ITF has to operate on a rapidly changing global scene, presents new challenges and opportunities.

We stand ready to face the new challenges and benefit from the opportunities.

ITF has come a long way since its inception. However its work is far from completed. We are fully aware of that. There is a need to strengthen the ITF as a vehicle for political action. We wish to increase ITF's influence as an international organization. ITF is unique as it brings together representatives of government, academia and non-governmental organizations. We wish to make better use of ITF's reservoir of knowledge and experience on Holocaust. In the ITF's Working Groups on Education, Remembrance, Academic Affairs and Communication you will find the best and most qualified experts on Holocaust.

At the plenary meeting in Oslo, we adopted unanimously several important resolutions. When implemented they will make ITF an even stronger organization. We have high goals, we are ambitious, we wish to be successful, we wish to be an active partner in the global efforts to make the world a better and more secure place.

Anti-Semitism is increasing globally. Racism and xenophobia continue to flourish in many countries. As the result of the elections to the European Parliament show, the rise of ultra rightwing parties is not a thing of the past. It is occurring in Europe today.

Knowledge of our dark past is necessary to fight contemporary Anti-Semitism and racism. Genocide and crimes against humanity is still happening in many places in the world. Knowledge about the back ground, purpose and significance of Holocaust is essential to raise public awareness and mobilize forces to push back such tendencies and trends. Adult and children must be aware of what happened, of the unprecedented tragedy, of the destruction of Jewish life in Europe and how seemingly civilized societies can implode and commit genocide.

As the only inter-governmental organization devoted exclusively to the memory of Holocaust, the ITF is uniquely positioned to lead the charge against ignorance. To take on and to succeed in this role, ITF must raise its profile throughout the world. It must gain political traction to achieve these goals. That is what we are working for. That is what we will do.

To achieve our objectives, we are open to make required changes in our working methods. We are developing mechanisms to alert us to pernicious developments in our own societies. We will reach out and invite other countries to join us in the struggle. The ITF stands ready to play its part. We are ready to cooperate with the Terezin Institute. Our common endeavors must be based on a clear division of work. We must not duplicate.

I recently visited Auschwitz. As anyone who has ever been to these places of mass murder can tell you, they sear the horrific reality of the Holocaust into one's memory forever. ITF will continue to build a bridge between the terrible events in Europe's recent past and values of the younger generation of the global community.

We must preserve sites of the Holocaust mass murder. This is an important part of ITF's work. The international community has an important responsibility to contribute to such preservation.

We need to constantly remind ourselves of the fragility of human life and the vulnerability of our societies. We must preserve the memory of the Holocaust for posterity as a lesson in moral failure of humanity. We do so with the hope that we can indeed learn from the past.

I wish the organizers of this important conference every success.