

**Statement by the ITF Chair, Ambassador Tom Vraalsen at the
Ceremony of Handing over the Norwegian ITF Chairmanship to Israel
in Berlin on 4 March 2010**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to welcome today Mr. Dan Tichon and the members of his team to the handover ceremony of the Chairmanship of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF). I also welcome the diplomatic representatives of the ITF member and affiliated Countries as well as many other prominent guests.

A year ago Norway assumed the Chairmanship of the ITF. This entails noble responsibility. The ITF is a voice of moral authority on the international scene when it comes to raising awareness about the Holocaust. Its place is in the forefront in the struggle against the worrisome trend of Holocaust denial and trivialization.

When Norway took upon itself this task, it was determined to continue the excellent work of the previous Chairs, in particular the Austrian Chairmanship, to further professionalize the ITF.

I would like to extend my personal thanks to the ITF membership, and in particular Israel and Austria as part of the Troika, for supporting us in our endeavours to make the ITF more effective and politically relevant. My thanks also go to the Honorary Chairman of the ITF, Professor Yehuda Bauer, and the Academic Advisor, Ms. Dina Porat for their important contributions to the work of the ITF.

I am also grateful to my team in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Here, I wish to mention one person in particular. That person is my trusted colleague and close friend, Monica Furnes. Monica your talent for creative thinking and your hard work has significantly contributed to making the ITF into what it is today. I truly thank you for what you have done and what you have achieved.

I extend my appreciation for the work of the dedicated team from HRG Nordic: May Olsen, Linn Hagtvedt, Monica Ness and their colleagues. In an impressive manner they have managed the infrastructure and conference services.

I wish to thank members of the Norwegian delegation to the ITF for their vital contributions: Odd-Bjørn Fure, Jon Reitan, Grete Haug, Peder Nustad

and Katusha Otter Nilsen. I am also grateful for the contributions from Tone Jørstad at the Falstad-centre, Anne Sender at the Mosaic Religious Community in Oslo and Henriette Kahn at the Jewish Museum in Trondheim.

A warm thanks to the Mayor of Trondheim, Ms. Rita Ottervik and her professional staff for their indispensable support during the ITF Plenary meeting in Trondheim in December.

A special thanks to the Norwegian Ambassador Sven Svedman and his professional team for arranging this ceremony.

Last but not least my deepest appreciation for the untiring, efficient and dedicated work of the Executive Secretary of the ITF, Ms. Kathrin Meyer. It is been a true pleasure working with you. The ITF is well positioned having you as its Executive Secretary. It simply could not have been better. I also extend my thanks to Lev Libeskind and the other members of Kathrin's staff.

Today we are greatly honoured to hand over the Chairmanship of the ITF to Israel. We are certain that Israel will continue the important task to further strengthen the ITF.

I would like to use this opportunity to share with you our reflections on where the ITF is today and the future challenges it will face.

The Stockholm Declaration, which is the founding document of the ITF, commits countries to fight the evils of genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia. Its point of reference is the Holocaust. The ITF has been instrumental when it comes to adding pieces to the jigsaw of knowledge about the Holocaust: the ideology behind it, the driving forces, the details of the mass-murders and the implications for mankind.

To qualify for membership, countries are required to scrutinise all aspects of their history with regard to the Holocaust: both actions and omissions. No one comes out clean from this painful, but vital, self-scrutiny and soul-searching

Through this exercise we are confronted with how unbelievable horror and brutality can suddenly replace tolerance, dignity and humanity. This in itself is an important experience for societies.

The necessity of passing on this knowledge to younger generations – particularly as the eye witnesses gradually pass away – is essential.

The unique feature of the ITF is its exceptional network of experts and academics in the fields of Holocaust education, remembrance and research. This pool of expertise has been given a political umbrella through the governmental representatives in the ITF Plenary. Thus the ITF has considerable potential to be an influential actor on the political scene.

As we assumed the Chair of the ITF, we recognized that the ITF had untapped potential in the global struggle against Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism. We asked ourselves how the reservoir of academic and practical

skills could be better utilised to help governments to confront increasing anti-Semitism, racism and exclusion of groups in their societies.

We found that there was a need to make structural changes in the way that the ITF conducts its business by enhancing and improving the interaction between the experts and the governmental representatives. We introduced reforms to revitalize the ITF and bring more political substance to its work. These reforms were based on the principle that the experts should provide unbiased guidance, while the governmental representatives must ensure that recommendations are transformed into political action. This is the only way that the ITF can make political impact.

Another important element in the reform package adopted during the Norwegian Chairmanship was the establishment of a Standing Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial. We are seeing both soft and hard revisionism and Holocaust relativism. There are even instances of blatant Holocaust denial. Norway strongly believes that the fight against this growing form of anti-Semitism calls for political leadership. Our politicians must engage and make it clear that such antisemitic expressions are not accepted in our societies.

In order to call for political action we need facts, we need sharp and clear analyses and assessment of the extent of Holocaust denial and trivialization and other forms of similar antisemitism. We need expert advice on how to combat these alarming trends. Here is where we believe the ITF through the Standing Committee can play a role. The members of the Standing Committee have just been appointed. The Committee will assume executing its mandate during the Israeli Chairmanship.

Furthermore, we introduced a new funding policy and procedures aiming at ensuring maximum effect of the limited funds at ITF's disposal for funding projects. It is based on modern principles of managing development aid. We believe that the new procedures will ensure financial accountability and oversight.

Another priority of Norway's chairmanship has been to address the prejudice and discrimination against the Roma people. The genocide of the Roma took place at the same time as the Holocaust, and was carried out by the same perpetrators. At present we are witnessing a growing tide of anti-Roma hostility and violence in Europe. Roma continue to be victims of widespread discrimination on a day-to-day basis. These are unacceptable realities that need an urgent and forceful response from the ITF. We trust that this matter will remain high on the ITF agenda.

As we now hand over the Chairmanship to Israel, we believe that the ITF is well equipped to continue raising awareness about the Holocaust and addressing the destructive forces that breed prejudice and intolerance.

However, there are still challenges that must be overcome. If the ITF is to make its voice heard and thereby become an influential player on the global scene, it must build a bridge between the past and present day challenges.

The history of the Holocaust is and should remain the core issue of the ITF. It must continue to promote education about the significance and legacy of it.

We face however challenges related to Holocaust fatigue. Thus we must prevent the study of the Holocaust from being reduced to a ritual exercise. The key is to ask ourselves how we can transform our knowledge of the past to address present day challenges.

ITF must always be ready to adapt to the current situation and make the necessary adjustments in its modus operandi and its agenda. The world is not static, neither should the ITF be.

The organizational structure of the ITF –or may be the lack of structure - needs to be examined. Is the present situation optimal? Is the Task Force able to deal effectively with current political issues? Does the system of largely autonomous Working Groups meet the needs of the Plenary when it comes to providing substantive material for political actions?

The ITF has 27 member Countries and is growing. Seven more countries are currently affiliated with the ITF and on the road to full membership. Can the Task Force continue to live without rules of procedure? Is the consensus based decision making procedure optimal? Should the ITF develop into a structured intergovernmental organization with clear lines of command and control?

In the Working Groups there has been a proliferation of sub-groups. In some instances with cross fertilization in the sub-groups the lines of reporting and responsibility are unclear. This can be a recipe for confusion. This needs to be addressed urgently.

I believe the members will have to address issues like this if they wish to develop the Task Force to a new and higher level.

Dear Mr. Tichon, I am handing over the Chairmanship to you and Israel. We had the pleasure of spending yesterday with you and your excellent team for the purpose of transferring some our experience in chairing the ITF. I am convinced that the ITF will benefit from your extensive experience as a politician. We know that you and your team will contribute to shaping the ITF to become an even stronger instrument for communicating the dangers of genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, and anti-Semitism and to fight these destructive evils.

We will remain ready to support you wherever we can within and outside the Troika. I wish you all the best.

Thank you

