

Closing remarks by the ITF Chair, Tom Vraalsen at the Trondheim Plenary Session 3 December 2009

Dear Friends,

The second and last Plenary meeting under Norwegian Chairmanship has come to an end. Before we adjourn the meeting, allow me to share with you some personal reflections on where the ITF is today and some of the future challenges it will face.

As Norway took over the Chair of the ITF eight months ago, we set for ourselves certain goals. We felt that the ITF had an untapped potential in the global struggle against Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism. In order to make full use of ITF's expertise, which you find in abundance in the Working Groups, the organization would have to change the way it works. Time had come for the ITF to professionalize its modus operandi if it were to play a role on the global political scene. And we are convinced that there is such a role to play for the ITF.

At the June Plenary session in Oslo we tabled a package of reform proposals. The purpose was threefold:

1. Maximise the use of the output from the Working Groups.
2. Strengthen the coordination and the general relationship between the Plenary and the Working Groups.
3. Develop a financial system built on transparency and accountability.

We saw this as a win-win proposition offering a greater role to the Working Groups and energizing the Plenary. You were kind enough to support our proposals and we were grateful for that.

At this our second Plenary session, we completed the package of reform proposals. A new approach for program applications has been presented. We also tabled a proposal that the ITF

should establish a Standing Committee on anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.

We believe that the modifications to the ITF's working methods have strengthened it in the struggle against Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism. However, it is not for me to pass judgement on whether we have succeeded or not. It is for you, the members and the Working Groups, to pass that judgement. And it is for you to make maximum use of the mechanisms and fora available to you.

I have put a lot of emphasis on issuing Chair's statements whenever there has been a question in the public domain within the mandate of the ITF.

I have stated on several occasions that I believe the ITF should establish a mechanism to periodically review to what extent the members Countries honour their obligation under the Stockholm Declaration. To become a Member one needs to climb a demanding ladder, proving its dedication to the mandate of the ITF at each and every step. Yet as an accepted member of the ITF one is never asked to report on how it in practical terms uphold and promote principles enshrined in the Stockholm Declaration. This is a paradox that must be addressed.

This brings me to the future challenges:

The organizational structure of 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 present day challenges? Does the system of largely autonomous Working Groups meet the needs of the Plenary when it comes to providing substantive material for political actions?

At present, the Working Groups are organizationally disconnected from the Plenary. Thus, the ITF virtually consists of two separate but organically connected bodies: one academic and one political. Should they be bonded and how?

The ITF has 27 members and is growing. 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? I believe you will have to

address issues like this if you wish to develop the Task Force to a new and higher level.

Furthermore; many countries would like to join the ITF as observers. Should they continue to be allowed to address the Plenary? To what extent can they make interventions in the Working Groups? Should their interventions be reflected in the reports of the ITF?

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 command are unclear. This can be a recipe for confusion. This needs to be addressed urgently.

As the Working Groups are now asked to give expert advice on highly political issues, how should disagreements within the Working Groups be dealt with and reflected in the reports to the Plenary?

The ITF is unique in the sense that it has two Plenary sessions yearly. Would one Plenary session be enough provided that the many other meetings are carefully timed? With one session only, money would be saved and the workload on the secretariat would be less.

I believe that these are some of the issues the coming Chairs will have to deal with. They are not easily resolved, but they are necessary to tackle if the Task Force is to play the role expected of it in the unyielding struggle against Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism.

I wish the Israelis the very best of luck for next year.

It has been a pleasure to work with all of you.