

London Conference against Anti-Semitism; February 2009;
Statement of the Chairman for the Task Force for International
Co-operation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research,
Ambassador Ferdinand Trauttmansdorff (Austria)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am sure many of you have read that the walls of the concentration camp Mauthausen have been smeared last week. The message sent by this act of desecration cannot be merely put aside as the unacceptable stupidity of a few extremists:

The message painted in red letters on the walls of Mauthausen said the following: What the Jew has been for our fathers, the brood of the Moslems is for us – beware – 3rd world war - 8th crusade.

These words are sending chills down every decent person's spine. This message that connects the Holocaust to today's xenophobic attitudes cannot be seen isolated from the general attitude against foreigners and follows a terrible logic that must not be underestimated.

We surely hope that the perpetrators will be found. But this act leaves us asking questions: Should all those who teach young generations the truth about the horrors of the Holocaust be discouraged? Have all the efforts invested so far in the field of Holocaust education, remembrance and research been in vain?

This act just shows that the objectives and the endeavors undertaken by the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, short ITF, are as valid as at the time when this organization was initiated more than 10 years ago.

Although the Task Force has been active for more than a decade now, it is not very well known even within the community of those engaged in combating Anti-Semitism. I admit that already its name is complicated. Its structure, consisting of a Chair, Plenary Sessions, Working Groups and a small Secretariat is surely not providing a clear enough profile for the organization to make it easily identifiable on the international scene. The working methods are not event- but process-oriented and thus do not contribute to an enhanced international media presence.

And yet the Holocaust taskforce ITF is a 26 member states organization and keeps growing. Its work is based on the so called Stockholm Declaration of 2001, which defines the main objectives of the Task Force. Although this Declaration does not define the fight against Anti-Semitism as its most important objective, combating Anti-Semitism is in fact the most important intended results of the work of the Task Force. Objective Nr. 3 of the Stockholm Declaration, for instance, reads as follows:

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.

Indeed the state of the culture of commemorating the Holocaust in a given society serves as a Litmus-test for the efficiency of its defensive mechanisms against Anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance and extremism. If the Holocaust is denied or trivialized even in a subtle manner, Anti-Semitic attitudes are present. They are at least, so to speak, around the corner. If the truth about the Holocaust is held high, forms part of the education curricula and is constantly remembered, a society should be considered vaccinated against Anti-Semitism by maintaining the consciousness, whereto such attitude can lead to, particularly if it is underestimated, belittled or even ridiculed. We all know that prejudices, stereotypes, conspiracy theories about Jews, even if they were not yet accompanied by violence, were the tree and the branches on which the poisonous and deadly fruits of hatred and ultimately of the Holocaust were growing.

This conference showed how many of such prejudices and stereotypes are creeping into our societies again. They appear under the disguise of political correctness, claiming the right to criticize Israel. They are used by political movements who consider themselves above any suspicion of succumbing to Anti-Semitic prejudices while doing exactly that. They appear under the protection of freedom of speech as pictures assimilating individual pictures from the Holocaust to seemingly similar pictures from Gaza.

Without wanting to belittle the tragic death and individual suffering of so many civilians in Gaza, this situation simply cannot be compared to the monstrosity of the Holocaust. This is clear to all of us participating at this conference but I it as clear to the public at large?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Holocaust Taskforce has to respond to the worrying developments with increased vigor and determination. We are committed to do so. We have been working to increase the efficiency of our network of experts and diplomats, thus increasing our capacity to proactively address challenges that the Holocaust education, remembrance and research are facing. Yes, we are facing Holocaust fatigue, soft and hard revisionism, attempts to put the Holocaust into perspective in relation to other situations to which populations have been falling victim.

We are committed to use the remembrance of the Holocaust to address not only extremist manifestations of Anti-Semitism but to address the mainstream. By educating about the Holocaust, we will reach out to the dinner table discourse, to the less visible but even more dangerous mainstream Anti-Semitism. This needs efforts and initiative on all level, particularly civil action. But it also requires political action and that is why we

are so grateful to this initiative undertaken by British parliamentarians, in particular John Mann, MP.

We have so far worked mainly as a discrete network. But we will have to join hands with others. We are about to conclude cooperation engagements with other international organizations, the Council of Europe, OSCE, the European Union, the UN, the UNESCO. We will have to become more visible and work on our profile, although we are committed to work below the radar screen of News headlines. But all the more we need partners particularly among the civil society. And we need partners in particular for political action also outside the governments, mainly parliamentarians. Please take our hands.

On March 17 I will hand over the Chairmanship of the Holocaust Taskforce to Norway and after Norway, Israel will take over the Chairmanship. Even if many of you here did not know enough about ITF, I am sure, the profile of our organization as a very valuable partner in addressing Anti-Semitism in an effective manner on all levels of the society will rise.

Thank you for your valuable attention.