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International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

Speech of Dr. Mario Silva
Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)

**OSCE High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination
(Including Human Rights Youth Education on Tolerance and Non-
Discrimination)
Tirana, 21-22 May 2013**

Dear Chairman-in-Office,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon. I am honored to be invited to speak to you today and to have the opportunity to represent the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

We are here today to discuss a topic that is of continual importance in modern political discourse. As acknowledged at the 2004 Berlin Conference on Anti-Semitism, antisemitism poses a threat to democracy, security, and the values of civilization. The need to combat, respond to, and prevent antisemitism, as well as to promote Holocaust remembrance and education, should be recognized and acted upon by governments around the world. As Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said, "...we must resist the error of viewing the Holocaust as a strictly historical event. It's not good enough for politicians to stand before you and say they remember and mourn what happened over six decades ago...they must be unequivocal in their condemnation of anti-Semitic despots, terrorists and fanatics. That is the only way to honour the memory of those who were consumed by the Holocaust."



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As we are all aware, antisemitism is present in across all strata of society and takes many different forms. It is primarily espoused by various extremist groups at all ends of the political spectrum, including far right groups, far left groups, and radical religious groups. The scope of the problem is demonstrated by the fact that strong antisemitic attributes are the only common feature shared by all of these extremist groups. These groups utilize diminishment of the Holocaust, Holocaust denial, and the technique of blaming the Jews for the Holocaust in their antisemitic rhetoric.

Holocaust denial, or blaming Jews for exaggerating, creating, or misusing the Shoah for political or financial gain, is simply one of the many forms of both classical and current antisemitism. “Traditional” antisemitic myths and images, such as the belief in a “world conspiracy” through which Jews gain power and advantages through business, finance, and the media, continue to widely persist.

There is no question that antisemitism is on the rise throughout the world. The 2011 Pew Research Global Attitudes Project survey found that opinion ratings for Jews “...are uniformly low in the predominantly Muslim nations surveyed – in all seven of these nations, less than 10% have a positive opinion of Jews. Indeed, outside of Indonesia, less than 5% offer a positive opinion.” A 2005 survey of 12 European countries found that an average of an average of 48% of those surveyed answered “probably true” to the statement: “Jews still talk too much about what happened to them during the Holocaust.” This same survey was carried out in five European countries in 2007 and seven in 2009, with the result that an average of 47% and 43% agreed with this statement, respectively.

These numbers demonstrate that Holocaust denial and antisemitism are not simply propagated by extremist groups, but that these views are also held within general society. This is evidenced by the support for extremist parties seen in recent



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elections. In addition to traditional and modern manifestations of antisemitism, attention must be paid to tendencies towards trivialization and diminishment of the Holocaust.

Through our work, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance also sees examples of the many forms of antisemitism. To illustrate one instance, the IHRA runs an annual funding program for multilateral projects that increase government involvement, focus awareness on the Holocaust and contribute to combating antisemitism and xenophobia, and create sustainable structures for Holocaust education, remembrance and research. Grant recipients are often asked to build a network in their countries to facilitate the continuation of projects and efforts concentrating on Holocaust remembrance. In some countries, however, we have found this to be extraordinarily difficult since many organizations and individuals do not want to be associated with “Jewish topics” due to a fear of antisemitism. This is an alarming sign, particularly since it is most common in countries without a strong tradition of Holocaust education and remembrance.

In response to the continuing upsurge in antisemitism around the world, in 2009 the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance created a Standing Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial in order to develop a common approach to assess, address, and counter the spread of antisemitism. Holocaust denial is one particular aspect of antisemitism that is a special focus of the work of this Standing Committee, and its continue commitment to this issue highlights the importance and relevance of this topic.

It is clear that neither combating antisemitism nor remembrance of the Holocaust should be viewed as a Jewish issue or problem, but rather as a mainstream task that needs to be addressed by governments and societies at every level. The United Nations acknowledged in its resolution creating International Holocaust



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Remembrance Day on 27 January that this work of memory and responsibility belongs to the international community, governments, and to all mankind. Holocaust remembrance is therefore vital to the efforts of combating antisemitism.

This was one of the reasons that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly known as the ITF, was initiated in 1998 by former Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson along with Prime Minister Tony Blair and President Bill Clinton. The IHRA is the only inter-governmental body devoted exclusively to the memory of the Holocaust. What started out as a small ad hoc group brainstorming about how to prevent the Holocaust from being forgotten has developed into a group of 31 member countries devoted to issues relating to Holocaust education, remembrance, and research. The IHRA also currently has four observer countries and welcomes expressions of interest in full membership from non-affiliated countries.

In January 2000, Göran Persson invited the members of the IHRA and other interested governments to participate in “The Stockholm International Forum on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.” This was the first major international conference of the new millennium, and 46 countries were represented by their Heads of State or senior representatives. The forum’s outcome was a message for the future that highlighted mutual understanding as one of the important lessons to be learned from the Holocaust and underlined the responsibility of the international community to fight the evils of genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, antisemitism, and xenophobia. This document, the Stockholm Declaration, is the basis of our work.

The Stockholm Declaration is a commitment to combating these tendencies at the highest political level. The OSCE’s 2004 Berlin Declaration also strongly condemns the escalation of antisemitic violence and recognized that “the scourge of antisemitism



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is not unique to any one country, and calls for steadfast perseverance by all participating States.”

With this recognition of common goals, the IHRA and OSCE/ODIHR signed a Memorandum of Understanding to develop and ensure close cooperation on Holocaust education, remembrance, and research. In this spirit, I encourage all OSCE participating States not yet affiliated with the IHRA to consider joining, particularly given the depth of mutual interest on fostering Holocaust remembrance and combating antisemitism and Holocaust denial.

IHRA believes that Holocaust education, remembrance, and research should shed light on the past as well as on the present. Genocide and crimes against humanity still occur in many places around the world. Knowledge about the background, purpose, and significance of the Holocaust is essential to raise public awareness and mobilize forces to combat such tendencies. Countries need to continue their efforts to prevent the unprecedented character of the Holocaust from being downplayed and questioned and to preserve the memory of the Holocaust with the hope that we can learn from the past.

The universality of Holocaust remembrance is applicable to all countries, regardless of their history during the Second World War. Canada is a primary example of this, and our own history informs our current dedication to the aims of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. Although the atrocities of the Second World War did not occur on Canadian soil, Canada was and continues to be deeply affected by the Holocaust.

Before and during World War II, Canada adopted what was, according to scholars, perhaps the most exclusionary policy towards European Jewish refugees in the developed world, which sought to prevent the admission into Canada of virtually any



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Jews fleeing the Holocaust. This was most notoriously manifested in Canada's refusal to allow the MS *St. Louis*, which was carrying over 900 Jewish refugees, to enter Canadian waters in 1939. In total, Canada received only a few hundred European Jews between 1936 and 1945. Given Canada's history of immigration and refugee resettlement, it is only appropriate that Canada eventually became the home of the third-largest number of Holocaust survivors in the world.

The Holocaust is the only historical event that is still questioned and subject to debate about whether it should be taught in schools and included in educational textbooks. Discussions about combating antisemitism often focus on identifying effective policies and the role of governments in addressing antisemitic rhetoric. In the experience of the IHRA, Holocaust remembrance can be one effective tool in fighting antisemitism. There is a tendency to consider Holocaust remembrance to be a topic that deals exclusively with the past, while antisemitism is current and pressing. I challenge this view on the basis that Holocaust remembrance and antisemitism are inextricably linked, and the future of combating antisemitism lays in increased, effective, and widespread efforts to promote Holocaust remembrance.

As stated in the Stockholm Declaration, "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."

Thank you.