

Opening speech to the Holocaust Task Force (ITF) meeting in Oslo done by Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Gahr Støre

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Professor Bauer
Excellencies
Ladies and gentlemen
Friends

Welcome to Oslo and to the plenary meeting of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF).

Norway is proud to host this important gathering – as we are proud of assuming the chair of the ITF. We will engage actively and do our utmost to take this crucial initiative forward.

Genocide starts with people. It is people who create an environment of fear. It is people who commit the atrocities – wherever they occur. History has demonstrated time and again: Cruelty cannot be linked to nationality, ethnicity or religion. It can surface anywhere, at any time. However, so too can the will to fight it. The human mind can be a most inhuman weapon – but it is also our most formidable power.

For many generations of Norwegians, the building Victoria Terrasse that houses the Foreign Ministry where I work, is a strong symbol of a dark period of our history. In its cellar, prisoners were tortured by the Gestapo between 1940 and 1945. Today, two floors above the torture chambers, the Foreign Ministry staff working on human rights, peace, reconciliation and humanitarian efforts have their offices.

If we look at this from a wider perspective, we see that it was the fight for freedom and democracy that made this transition possible. People took responsibility, fought evil, chose a new direction and renewed the building's soul.

Villa Grande – which today houses the Holocaust Centre - was built by a great Norwegian industrialist and its strong and monumental architecture makes it a landmark in Oslo. But the building's message has not always been the same.

During the Second World War, Villa Grande became the home and base of the Norwegian Nazi collaborator Vidkun Quisling – a symbol of dishonour and treason. This shaped the soul of the building at the time and for many years afterwards.

From the top of the building people must have been able to observe the ships carrying Jews to the extermination camps as they sailed down the dark winter fjord of 1942–43.

Today a new vision has come to Villa Grande, the Holocaust centre. A new vision that has its own story and a new direction. We are conveying a new message – driven by the desire to learn from the past, to show how small streams can run together to create a flood of man-made tragedy like the Holocaust.

So we learn: Buildings do not have an identity of their own. It is we – acting as responsible citizens who give buildings their identity, their flavour and their message.

Dear friends,

In 1998, the ITF was established by forward-looking men like Sweden's former Prime Minister Göran Persson and Professor Yehuda Bauer. It started with a small group of like-minded countries. From being a small club of friends, it has developed into a permanent inter-governmental body with 26 member countries from four continents. This demonstrates the importance countries attach to preserving the memory of the Holocaust for future generations.

The Stockholm Declaration stated clearly: The international community shares a responsibility to fight genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, that together we must uphold the terrible truth of the Holocaust against those who deny it, and that 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.

Since its creation, the ITF has developed a unique network of experts in the fields of Holocaust education, remembrance and research. We need organised cooperation in this field. We need to strengthen remembrance of the Holocaust and we need the ITF to help us confront increasing anti-Semitism, racism and exclusion of groups in our societies.

Since 1998 the ITF has expanded. And as with any organisation who expands its size and mission we need to ask if we are organised in order to cope accordingly. The eye witnesses to the Holocaust are passing away. Knowledge of our dark past is necessary to fight contemporary anti-Semitism and other forms of racism.

We need to organise ourselves to secure the active remembrance and knowledge about the background, purpose and significance of the Holocaust. It is essential to raise public awareness of genocides in general and our efforts to prevent them.

We need to strengthen the ITF as a vehicle for political action. It must further strengthen its knowledge base and increase its influence as a political actor on the global scene.

How can we succeed? How can we transform the knowledge of the past to address present challenges?

The ITF is in a unique position to combat anti-Semitism. It is in a unique position to provide governments with input on how to prevent genocide.

But the ITF, with its reservoir of knowledge, should have a more significant political impact on fundamental questions on today's global agenda. In order to achieve this, I believe the ITF's working methods must be improved.

The Chair has proposed a package aimed at reforming the ITF along these lines. The Norwegian Government stands behind this proposal. I encourage you to make bold decisions to make sure that the ITF continues to be a relevant and sustainable political body.

Let me turn to Norway and share with you some reflections on why we have chosen to engage actively with the ITF. Sixty-seven years ago, the mass arrest of the Norwegian Jews started in occupied Norway and in this city. Today we know – and we need to spell it out loud although it may be painful to some: The decision was taken elsewhere, but the arrests were carried out by uniformed Norwegian police, Norwegian men, who handed over the Norwegian Jews to the German Sicherheitspolizei, who then herded them brutally into the hull of the M/S Donau, the ship used by the Nazi regime to transport prisoners to Germany.

The final destination of this and following deportations was Auschwitz. The purpose was annihilation.

Following the deportation and killing of one third of Norway's Jewish population, the Nazi regime directed its destructive measures against the Romany people, advocating a "Jewish solution" for yet another minority group.

In 1999, Norway was the first country to finalise a restitution process and compensate Jews for their losses and sufferings during the Nazi occupation.

It came late. Nevertheless it was important, not only because of the economic restitution. It was important also because the compensation was based on moral considerations and on an acceptance of responsibility for errors of the past.

In 1814 – when the Norwegian constitution was written and adopted in turbulent political times – it was specifically mentioned that Jews and Jesuits were not allowed into the Kingdom of Norway.

Last year Norway celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of Henrik Wergeland. His position as Norway's national poet is due as much to his ardent political and social commitment as to his writing. He argued strongly that Jews should be admitted to Norway. His actions paved the way for the general legalisation of Jewish immigration to Norway in 1851.

They came in small numbers – in the early years mainly from Denmark and Germany, and later from Eastern Europe. They have since set their positive mark on the Norwegian society.

To put it into perspective: It is a paradox that at the same time as Jews were moving into Norway in small numbers, fleeing from pogroms and life threatening repression in Eastern Europe, there was mass emigration of Norwegians to the United States because of difficult living conditions in Norway. Almost 800 000 Norwegians emigrated to the United States between the 1870s and about 1920. This is an enormous number, considering that the population of Norway at the turn of the century was 2.2 million.

Although the majority of the Jews settled in Oslo or Trondheim, there were Jewish families in 62 other municipalities all around Norway, often just one or two families, starting small businesses and establishing a new life in a new country.

A special exhibition – “Wergeland’s Legacy. Jewish Life in Norway 1851–1945” – is now on display at the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv. The exhibition is the result of cooperation between the Tel Aviv Museum of the Diaspora, the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History and the Oslo Jewish Museum.

The exhibition depicts the lives of people who fled from terror and persecution and who looked for a land where they “could sleep securely at night”. The exhibition also tells about the confrontation of the Jewish people with a culture that was foreign to them and their struggle to put down roots in a new country.

The story of Jewish life and culture in Norway is a story of a minority group that came to Norway 150 years ago, but it is also a metaphor – of the triumph of hope over despair. It is the story of a small Jewish community that emerged in Norway many years ago and never numbered more than a couple of thousand individuals, endured the difficult years of the Holocaust, then reconstituted itself after the war and found its place as part of Norwegian society once again. They not only survived. They managed to rebuild their strength and their culture.

Again we need to ask: How could the Holocaust happen? In the search for an answer we need to understand our history. But we also have to thoroughly understand our own contemporary societies. We need to look into how chaos can suddenly replace normality and how humanity can be lost.

Well conducted research sheds light on the past, but also helps us to understand events in our contemporary societies.

The currents that led to the Holocaust did not end with the war. They reappear in new and ugly disguises, in new ways and places. New names are added to the list: Srebrenica, Rwanda, Darfur.

That is why the question “how could the Holocaust happen” never can be asked and answered too many times – it needs to be asked and answered again and again, from one generation to the next. Because the question is not only a question of certain historical facts, it is an eternal reminder of what the human mind is capable of initiating.

Prejudice grows behind closed doors and in dark corners. It may eventually surface through microphones and on the streets., The battles have to be fought in the grey zones, against ideologies of exclusion and supremacy, against anti-Semitism, and ways of thinking that open up for hatred.

In our own society, and on our own streets, minorities feel stigmatised, insecure and even afraid. As a society and civilisation we have to fight this.

We are facing challenges related to Holocaust remembrance fatigue, we are facing soft and hard revisionism including Holocaust relativism, and we are facing blatant Holocaust denial. We must fight these challenges.

This is why the Norwegian Government has decided to announce its support of NOK 2 millions to the maintenance of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Last year 1 130 000 people visited Auschwitz. More than 30 0000 were Norwegians, most of them schoolchildren – and one of them was my son, aged 15. Everyone who has been there knows what an eye-opening experience this is. And we need to keep the history alive for future generations.

The president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has publicly denied that the Holocaust took place. In several countries, minorities are openly discriminated against and persecuted – sometimes to death. In our world today, we still hear incitement of hatred, the spreading of politics of fear and promotion of intolerance.

The fight against these cruelties is not over. We can not and will not rest. We must be wary of attitudes and actions that can breed renewed anti-Semitism or other ideologies and mindsets that exclude or segregate groups of people, spread hatred and intolerance and pursue a policy of discrimination of minorities.

Prejudice must be fought with firm resistance through awareness-raising through knowledge and through education.

In the ITF we have an important tool for helping ourselves and for helping others. We do so by reaching out to people's minds, both individually and collectively. We will do so through cooperation with schools, museums, memorials and research institutions.

Norway is proud to chair the work of the ITF. We know what responsibility it entails. The ITF's work is essential to ensure that future generations understand and remember the Holocaust and take this knowledge with them into their lives - to strengthen tolerance, human rights and respect for their fellow man. This is a noble task and a challenge to us all. As chair Norway is honoured and fully committed to take on this challenge.

Thank you.