

International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime

9 December, Trusteeship Council, UN Headquarters

Keynote speech by Adama Dieng, UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to start by congratulating the General Assembly for taking the initiative to establish this International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime. This is a day of great significance. The name given to this international day underlines the importance of its message: "Remember the Victims, Prevent Genocide". The slogan chosen for the Day highlights not only the importance of remembrance but also the important link to prevention.

I would like to congratulate Armenia for its sponsorship of the resolution that established this day. The number of co-sponsors of the resolution is noteworthy as well as its adoption by consensus.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank our colleagues in the Department of Public Information for their hard work in developing the graphics and media campaign for this international day. I believe that the symbol - of a hand with candles for fingers - is a powerful representation both of our resolve to stop genocide and of our tribute to its victims.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This international day has two important elements. It is about the past, and also about the future. Remembering the past has to be more than reading facts from history books. Remembering the victims of genocide and the crimes committed in the past must contribute to our understanding of the present and guide our actions in the future. What we will be tomorrow will depend on our actions today.

The memory of genocide should prompt us to action. It should scare us into avoiding past mistakes. Remembering, in this context, only acquires its full meaning if we use lessons painfully learnt from the past to improve the lives of today's and future populations.

The establishment of this organisation, the United Nations, the shaping of its norms and policies and the evolution of its work over the 70 years of its existence are testament to this process. The events of the twentieth century have shaped the United Nations. It was the atrocities committed during the Second World War, in particular the Holocaust, that led to the adoption of the Genocide Convention in 1948, 67 years ago today. However, genocide was not eliminated by the Convention. These crimes have continued to be committed. Nevertheless, we have the capacity to change our world and make it a place where genocide is no longer a reality.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Most of us are unable to even begin to imagine the extreme pain, the suffering and the trauma caused by the violence associated with genocide and other atrocity crimes. During my visit to Iraq in November, I spent time with members of the Yazidi community and other minority groups. I was deeply moved by the stories they shared of the horrors they have been through –killings, rape, torture, forced displacement and the destruction of their communities - simply because of the beliefs that they hold, simply because of who they are. It is difficult to grasp that human beings can be so cruel, and in such a deliberate way. Unfortunately, this is just one of too many examples around the world today.

Though we are shaken by what we see and hear, few of us really know what it is to like to experience such violence. We are very lucky. It is therefore our duty to those who have perished and those who have survived, and to their families, to remember what happened, to not forget. Promoting the memory of past genocides, acknowledging their occurrence, addressing the consequences and respecting and fulfilling the rights of the victims, not only dignifies the victims, it also represents our determination not to let these crimes be repeated.

It is important to highlight that genocide is not a crime contained within one culture or one region of the world. Genocide is, at its heart, an identity-based conflict and to prevent it means managing diversity constructively. This is a message for all nations. Our countries and regions are extremely diverse and it is in this diversity that their richness lies. We are a multitude of races, ethnicities and nationalities. We have different cultures; we practice different religions and have different beliefs. We must protect this diversity and use it to promote dialogue and understanding, not to spread hatred and intolerance. This protection is not only a responsibility, but is founded in the obligations set out in international law – respect for all, without discrimination.

I am extremely worried by the outpouring of hostility, xenophobia and intolerance that we have witnessed in recent weeks – and in recent months – in response to the flight of refugees and migrants to Europe – and in response to terrorist attacks by violent extremists. This manipulation of people’s concerns for political gain is sickening – and as we know from the past, it is also dangerous.

It is in particularly during challenging times that we need to work together to dismantle prejudices and lies; and respond to hate speech and incitement, whether on the internet, or in public discourse. Governments, public figures, and individuals - we all have a responsibility to take action. Responding to messages of hate with messages of acceptance and respect will build trust and understanding and - reduce the risk of violence that could lead – ultimately – to genocide and other atrocity crimes. More than ever, the call to action should resonate deeply with us.

Genocide is not a crime contained in time. Genocide takes time to develop, and the consequences of the extreme violence that characterize the crime of genocide endure – they continue to be felt by the survivors and their families, as well as by the societies where they occurred, for generations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This day represents memory and a call to action - memory as a step towards action. Let us not continue to repeat the mistakes of the past. Let us act now to stop genocide from being part of our present or our future.