



THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

17 June 2015

Excellency,

I have the honour to transmit herewith a Summary of the key messages, recommendations and initiatives from the High-Level Thematic Debate on Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation, which I convened in conjunction with the Secretary-General and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations on 21 and 22 April 2015.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam K. Kutesa', with a large, stylized flourish above the name.

Sam K. Kutesa

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York

High-Level General Assembly Thematic Debate

Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation:

Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies and Countering Violent Extremism

21-22 April 2015

United Nations Headquarter, New York

President's Summary

The President of the General Assembly in conjunction with the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the UN Alliance of Civilizations convened a high-level thematic debate on “*Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation: Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies and Countering Violent Extremism*” on 21-22 April 2015.

The main objective of this high-level thematic debate was to provide an opportunity for Member States and faith leaders, along with others stakeholders to share experiences and to address key issues and challenges relating to the promotion on tolerance and reconciliation with aim of fostering peaceful and inclusive societies and countering violent extremism.

The following summary contains key messages and recommendations arisen from the thematic debate.

Plenary Sessions

Throughout the two days of debate, many speakers highlighted that the rise of radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism are threatening international peace and security and constitutes an obstacle to human development. The international response to this global threat must seek to address the deeper causes in order to resolve the problem and calibrated in such a way as not to exacerbate the challenge. Numerous speakers unambiguously emphasized that there can be no justification for terrorist attacks and acts of violence against innocent people – men, women and children – just like there can be no rational justification for attacks against places of worship, museums and historical sites as well as indiscriminate damage of irreplaceable artefacts of humanity's shared cultural heritage by terrorist groups.

Speakers pointed out that the international community must stand together and condemn, without reservation, all manifestations of intolerance, including anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism and all other forms of prejudice, incitement, harassment or violence against persons or communities based, inter alia, on race, ethnic origin or religious beliefs. Some speakers noted that acts of violent extremism, acts of terrorism, and human atrocities are being committed in the name of religion against innocent civilians. They also stressed that using violence in the name of religion is unacceptable and must be condemned regardless of whoever commits such a crime, whenever, wherever and for whatever reason.

Speakers underscored that in order to effectively address violent extremism the international community must work together across sectors, borders and faiths to address the serious challenges posed by intolerance and violent extremism through an integrated and balanced approach. Governments, religious leaders, civil society and community leaders must speak with one voice. It was underlined that addressing these challenges requires strong and coordinated global action. Therefore, a global preventive action should be put in place to prevent extremist groups from attracting and recruiting more young people.

Speakers underlined that increasing dialogue among the United Nations, religious leaders, civil society organizations and other relevant stakeholders will be essential to countering violent extremism and radicalization. They observed that tolerance, reconciliation, mutual understanding and respect as well as mutual acceptance, respect for cultural diversity, and interfaith collaboration can play a crucial role in helping people of different backgrounds build trusting relationships based on shared values and beliefs.

Regarding the causes behind radicalization and violent extremism, it was noted that there is no single root cause for violent extremism, intolerance and radicalization. It was noted that injustice and inequality, lack of rule of law, human rights violations, political exclusion and marginalization, as well as ethnic, national and religious discrimination can fuel divisions that contribute to intolerance and subsequently may propel violent extremism and radicalization. Some speakers further observed that it is important to examine challenges and actions and how they may contribute to creating breeding grounds for radicalization. Any economic interests that may be at play must be handled responsibly with paramount attention to human rights.

Participants further noted that sustained economic growth, social development, education, employment and decent jobs can play a role in addressing those critical challenges. Therefore, an important way to achieve human advancement and sustainable development is to secure a peaceful environment, social inclusion, stability and protection of human rights.

Many speakers identified youth, family, media, migration, and education as key areas of intervention for global efforts to promote tolerance and reconciliation and address violent extremism. Several speakers stressed that justice and social inclusion are essential to promote tolerance and reconciliation and that no one should be left on the margins, including religious minorities, youth, and persons with disabilities, indigenous people, women and others suffering from discrimination. They further stressed that transitional justice is critical to ensure a stable future.

It was observed that any effort to counter terror and protect innocents should comply with United Nations values and strictly respect human rights.

Panel Discussion: Practical Strategies for Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies and Countering Violent Extremism

During the panel discussion, which was focused on practical strategies to foster peaceful, inclusive societies and countering the threat of radicalization and violent extremism, the need

to employ human centered approaches was stressed. Participants pointed out that peaceful and inclusive societies can be built through focusing on education, youth challenges, constructive use of media, and realistic consideration of migration and globalization issues.

Referring to the definition of countering violent extremism (CVE) as “non-coercive measures to prevent mobilization to terrorism”, it was noted that violent extremism cannot result only in terrorist acts but also impede development, foster tensions and sectarian violence and threaten a fragile peace or stability in many environments, including post-conflict ones.

Describing the contemporary radical and extremist terrorist groups, speakers compared these groups to social movements with a potent weapon: a compelling idea, a mobilizing narrative that purports to address and explain a wide range of grievances that may be local or regional in focus but benefit from an apparent link to a global narrative. It was stressed that terrorist groups exploit longstanding grievances in conflict-situations as well as economic, political and social marginalization, infractions of human rights and civil liberties. These are then used to fuel and ignite the minds and hearts of members of a community and posit their heinous actions as a response. Speakers indicated that, to those communities that are distant, these grievances are brought close through the internet and social media.

Participants underlined the significance of undermining and delegitimizing extremist narratives by addressing the “pull factors”, conditions that mobilize individuals and groups. It was noted that the UN has a comparative advantage since the organization represents a global community and is present on the ground. It was further stressed that these efforts would achieve greater success with closer collaboration with regional and sub-regional organizations. Promotion and protection of human rights, freedom of expression and the access to information were mentioned among the most powerful counter-narratives to that of the extremists.

It was noted that fostering a culture of mutual tolerance and social inclusiveness through the promotion of inter-faith, inter-cultural and inter-community dialogue and interaction and thus building community resilience against the drivers of terrorism is needed. Engagement, understanding, empathy, respect, trust, reconciliation were cited as steps to achieve continuous dialogue.

Participants observed that community engagement in conflict zones and conflict affected communities is central. It was noted that women – and in particular mothers – of young people who are radicalized, vulnerable to or sympathizers of the extremists, must be empowered within their communities both financially and intellectually. It was further noted that in the process of de-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration into society of the young people who are the target of the extremists, transforming the hearts and minds through critical thinking and producing not only a counter-narrative but a better and more attractive narrative with the help of truth and interpretation of religious texts in the correct context is crucial. The importance of involving the communities, including religious leaders, in decision making processes and encouraging them to take the ownership in countering radicalization and violent extremism was also highlighted.

It was stressed that education remained key to any long-term process for building peace, tolerance, justice and intercultural understanding.

The importance of protecting and safeguarding cultural heritage in the face of violent acts of extremists against cultural sites and museums was underlined. It was noted that a more collaborative, targeted and longer-term response is needed to stop the acts of “cultural cleansing”.

Bearing in mind the ultimate goal - inclusive, peaceful societies under the rule of law - speakers concurred that success in countering violent extremism requires substantially investing in prevention. Despite a great deal of focus on capacity development efforts and attempts to build CVE-partnerships to be composed of representatives of the government, community leaders, religious leaders, private sector, media institutions and civil society, participants identified the real challenge as the absence of a viable mechanism that can effectively promote and ensure sustainable implementation of the measures best suited under the specific circumstances.

Plenary and Panel Discussion with Faith Leaders

Centred on interfaith dialogue, the second day featured many powerful and inspirational messages from religious leaders from across a wide range of faith traditions. These interventions, delivered both in plenary and in a panel discussion that focused on highlighting a counter-narrative, can help inform a collective response to the threat of intolerance and extremism. Many speakers stressed that continued open dialogue will be needed in the face of an evolving threat. It was underlined that to achieve reconciliation a series of steps were essential: engagement and dialogue leading to better understanding, empathy, respect and trust, ultimately opening the way to reconciliation.

Speakers unanimously rejected violence saying that “religion does not cause violence” and that “true faith stands for life”. In respecting differences the principle that violence and hatred have no place in a civilized world must be upheld. Stressing that the relevant question to ask is “How do we ensure that religion plays its positive role in our world of today?”, it was emphasized by most speakers that religion can nurture good human beings capable of exercising compassion, mercy, forgiveness, truthfulness, selflessness, humility, and love. Furthermore, it was underscored that religion seeks to give meaning and purpose to all the different components of human identity, from the most basic such as family, through the larger components of communities, ethnic groups, nations and peoples, to the widest components of humanity and creation as a whole. However, when identities come under threat, religion may acquire a far greater prominence in times and places of conflict, nurturing and strengthening the threatened identity.

Many speakers stressed that faith leaders around the world work on the front lines of their communities where they should use their spiritual and moral influence to counter the destructive narratives by being role models and standing up for moderation and mutual understanding. Furthermore, in order to promote tolerance, reconciliation and harmony,

greater visibility to enlightened inclusive voices would be necessary, including through the media.

Emphasizing that "a crime perpetrated in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion", it was also underlined that extremists – by misusing and abusing God's name to legitimize barbarism – exploit religion, falsify its image and use it to achieve non-religious objectives. It was highlighted that religious practitioners and scholars should assist in correcting misinterpretations and misquotations that may encourage radicalization and violent extremism.

Most interventions sought to explore how best to address the sources of violent extremism and radicalization. Poverty, social or political marginalization that lead people to feel that they are unwanted and unwelcome in the wider society were identified as such possible sources. Likewise, it was stressed that – in the world of today – inclusiveness has become a condition for a peaceful society and that concern for the common good cannot stop only with the citizens of a nation, but must cover also visitors and migrants. Theology itself, it was noted, must be inclusive and allow and promote respect for religious diversity. Another important pillar of building inclusive societies was identified as education. The role of community leaders and religious leaders was emphasized in making sure that educational systems are equipped with teaching all good essence of religious teachings. It was further stated that lack of education and extreme poverty in society are interconnected and that other particular socio-economic factors playing a role could be inequality, the lack of opportunity for upward mobility and failure to provide basic services. A further aspect was highlighted by stressing that violent religious extremism above all is an attitude of mind, fed by faith and religious fervor and that to counter and defuse it, one must reach into the mind, heart and soul of the militants and terrorists.

Stating that "tolerance is a necessary, but not sufficient, element of lasting peace", it was pointed out that mutual respect, acceptance and understanding are key elements and that promoting dialogue could serve as an antidote to sectarian tensions.

Recommendations and Initiatives

A number of participants referred to concrete ideas and suggestions from experiences and lessons learned in different contexts addressing various aspects of the subject matter:

- Iraq and Germany announced an initiative for a General Assembly resolution on saving the cultural heritage of Iraq.
- The Secretary-General recalled that he will forward a comprehensive United Nations Action Plan on preventing violent extremism to the General Assembly later this year, which will emphasize, among other things, the core values of peace, justice and human dignity as true alternatives to extremists' hatred and fear. It will also focus on prevention through equitable institutions, inclusive governance, and respect for human rights and the rule of law.

- The Secretary-General has committed to forming an advisory panel of faith leaders and others to guide the United Nations in addressing the complex issues arising from this broad agenda and for promoting tolerance and reconciliation.
- Encourage more intellectual exchanges and promote wider thematic dialogues on the roots and ramifications of terrorism and radicalisation.
- UN could engage more specifically through such means as strategic communications in countering terrorism or violent extremism, or in the form of more deliberate efforts to undermine and delegitimize extremist narratives.
- The UN's role as a neutral arbitrator in mediation efforts should be supported by confidence building measures to build trust and mutual respect.
- Leverage mechanisms and special procedures of the Human Rights Council, which provide a unique source of knowledge and practical tools, in order to nurture more tolerant and inclusive societies.
- The Action Plan for the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022), adopted by UNESCO's Member States and endorsed by the UN General Assembly, acts as a mobilizing framework for engaging existing and new partners and stakeholders in a dynamic manner, to create an enabling environment for fostering peaceful and inclusive societies.
- Cross-cultural internship programs to foster dialogue should be encouraged.
- Need to empower authentic and locally driven solutions in order to enhance an inclusive approach that builds on deep understanding of local and regional dynamics.
- Member States that have developed national strategies in the field of countering violent extremism could share these with other states a step forward in the practical arena of collaboration.
- The important role of religious institutions in working to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and – going forward – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), once adopted, in areas like education, health, rural development and reduction of extreme poverty, was noted and it was stressed that successful outcomes can also be achieved if religious communities are mobilized and empowered to undertake projects of peacebuilding, conflict resolution and dialogue.
- Bring religious voices into the mainstream of international discussions and relevant negotiations processes.
- Need for more sustained meaningful engagement between governments, civil society, religious leaders and the communities they represent and that these relevant stakeholders should be permanently connected and integrated into the work of the UN system on the basis of equitable and effective partnerships.
- A strong message from many participants underscored the need to protect holy sites with many saying that any attack on such sites are, in fact, an attack on all faiths.