

Opening Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, during an event organized by The President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, on the occasion of Holocaust Remembrance Day 2019, 21 January 2019

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends.

It is my pleasure to welcome all of you, in particular our international guests, to this year's commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Since its inception, the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has commemorated this important day.

We have welcomed Holocaust survivors, experts in the field, and the general public to come together, to remember, and most importantly, to learn essential lessons from this dark period in the history of humanity.

I will always remember the moving narratives shared by survivors, who spoke about their terrible ordeals, so that present and future generations will keep their memory alive and make a commitment never to repeat such atrocities.

However, as we all know, the world is facing increasing uncertainties and challenges. Some of the same alarm bells are ringing, and we cannot be complacent.

The rise of radical populism and political extremism; increasing rates of antisemitic crimes in Europe; hate crimes against minorities, all over the world; and a growing sense of distrust and disillusionment in our global institutions, which united us for decades, is creating an environment of suspicion and social unrest.

We must respond to these challenges effectively and proactively, first and foremost, by promoting education and a context of respectful dialogue.

The President's Foundation is making a contribution to achieve these efforts, and this year, has organised a series of school visits which were led by the Director of the Anne Frank Centre in Berlin and a representative of the Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies in Jerusalem.

I wish to thank them personally for their time and their commitment to share their knowledge and expertise with the many school children they met.

I am informed that there was overwhelming interest for this initiative from many schools in Malta and Gozo. This is very encouraging, because by educating new generations of schoolchildren and educators, we will be sowing seeds of peace and respect.

During this Remembrance Day event, we remember the millions of human beings who were persecuted during the Holocaust.

We remember the Jewish people, and others groups including people with disabilities, the LGBTIQ community, and Roma, who were the victims of discrimination, persecution, and genocide.

For this reason, discrimination is the focus of this year's event.

By highlighting such examples of persecution, based on intolerance towards others, we have the opportunity to reflect on the ongoing need to work towards more inclusive societies, which welcome everyone and celebrate the strength of diversity.

Our approach is also reflected in this year's theme of the United Nations outreach programme on the Holocaust, entitled 'Demand and Defend your Human Rights'.

This thematic focus also links with the recent 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

I believe that the Holocaust and its lessons have much to teach us, about the danger of extremism and the prevention of prejudice and discrimination.

In view of growing extremism and social tensions, in various parts of the world, and ideologies that push an agenda of exclusion and hatred, we need to give this message the utmost importance.

In the populist discourse of today, demagogues easily resort to scaremongering, with devastating consequences. We need to work together as a society to share knowledge and increase awareness about these disturbing trends.

One case in point is what is happening in our Mediterranean Region.

Desperate people are fleeing violence, environmental degradation, extreme poverty, and discrimination, only to be abandoned on open seas, because of the political games of a populist agenda.

In the words of EU Commissioner Avramopoulos, the “past weeks have not been Europe's finest hour... the European Union cannot continue to rely on unorganised, ad-hoc solutions.”

We must be courageous, and support one another, especially the most vulnerable members of our societies.

We must tackle misinformation and fake news, which is being used to justify inhuman treatment and incites violence.

The tragedies of the Holocaust must be a reminder of the essential importance of human dignity, and the defence of universe human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In this way, we shall be facing global uncertainty with the necessary resilience, by responding with action, with powerful conviction, with courage and strength.

Let us be tireless champions for the dignity of all people, both now and always.

Thank you for your attention.

