Monday evening, November 12, 2018

***celebration of 70 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and how we stand up for them in Greater Manchester***

United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Kate Gilmore.

What we do in the name of preventing violent extremism must answer hate, not spread it; enhance personal security for people living insecure lives, not weaken it; be rooted in building trust and connection between and within communities, not tear trust down. We must deepen the foundations for sustainable inclusive societies, not take measures that worsen our prospects of peace and prosperity.

If our efforts to prevent violent extremism are to do the good intended – human rights compliance may well not be sufficient – but it is essential. For, as the Secretary-General has emphasized “an utter disregard for human rights has often made things worse.”

Rights go wherever people go. Rights are the operating manual of our human condition being that with which we all are born and that from which no one can legitimately separate us - no matter how tough the times, complex the circumstances, how elusive are the solutions.

Acts of violent extremists - and we have to recognize - regrettably - in many instances our responses to them - are undermining the rights of people the world over.

Cruel, unconscionable acts by armed groups; the callous, criminal acts committed by those peddling fear; the atrocities perpetrated by individuals crazed with hate - these have pummeled fear, pain and grief into communities, large and small, the world over.

But it cannot be acceptable that our responses to these heinous crimes should perpetuate the very fear that they too perpetrate, or cause to the very communities we claim to protect, even more harm. Yet, around the world, efforts to prevent extremism are rolling back rights.

In a rush to demonstrate muscular response, some States have adopted draconian detention policies; revised - for the worse - criminal justice rules and practices; and imposed unprecedented limitations on freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and movement.

In domestic laws and policies, vague, elastic notions of “radicalization” are casting chilling effect on dissent; targeting whole groups of people rather than specific conduct; invading people’s right to privacy via broad-reaching surveillance practices. With few procedural safeguards in place - these ingredients concoct suspicion: loosening protections and fostering a climate of impunity; working, in other words, against the very grain of effective prevention.

An injudicious tolerance of intolerable conduct, by religious extremists and paramilitary groups alike, is driving not justice closer to the violent but violence closer to people simply for who they are – violence that is, directed against LGBTI persons, indigenous women, journalists, lawyers, activists, artists. Human rights defenders are on the frontlines of this often-vicious human rights erosion - targeted by both state and non-state actors alike, with women human rights’ defenders at particular risk.

One almost wonders if this does not suit violent extremists very well - after all, their aim is not to unleash a violent event, but to provoke reactions that destabilize, disrupt and distort.

Yet it is clear that we are born loving and with an irrepressible desire to beloved. But hate? All hate is learned. And as Nelson Mandela explained, it thus can be and must be unlearned.

We must ask ourselves “How do we ensure that we are not doing exactly what the extremist seeks?” And we must answer this with greater courage.

Trust and confidence are being undermined. Our wiser response would be to set about to rebuild exactly that - to rebuild trust in the State by those under its jurisdiction, and to reinforce the confidence of the people in systems of governance and of law.

For that, we must strengthen, not weaken, rights. We must:

* Focus prevention on behavior, not opinion or beliefs;
* We must choose our terminology far more carefully – look to the stable definitions and settled terms provided by international law, norms and
* Put the rights of victims of violence at the centre of our responses.
* Tackle the fertilizing milieu - work against gender based and other forms of discrimination – including racial and religious profiling;
* Step up efforts to dismantle inequalities – accelerate advance of economic, social and cultural rights for everyone, on an equal basis - that would provide the strongest life-line by which to immunize people against the rhetoric of violent extremism.
* Invest directly in the resilience of communities. Counter to many States’ practices today, it is a free, confident, independent, pluarlistic and diverse civil society - both in the virtual and the physical domains – that is the fastest, surest path to societies better able to navigate disputes and better able to sustain an equilibrium of peace.
* In this, particular effort is needed to include and young people.

Violent extremism is the offspring of many parents – of discrimination, injustice - actual and perceived; of political disenfranchisement and economic inequality; it’s more febrile when young people are left with little but their exclusion; when a faith is meets only contempt; when an identity is deprived of dignity; when belonging is denied.

None of this remotely excuses the contemptible acts of the violent extremist, but neither do these complex causes excuse wrongful action in reaction by the rest of us. We must stand for, stand with and stand up for human rights.

 Yes, there are critical differences between the root, the soil, the seed and the, but all must be present for something to grow. Planted in the soil of inequality, the seeds of intolerance, prejudice and bigotry readily grow a wicked harvest of hate, whose perverse fruit then is the violence that we now seek to prevent in us all. We must dig far deeper if we are to root out this reprehensible harvest more conclusively.

Impatient with injustice, wanting for conclusive eradication of preventable human suffering, seeking redress in the face of unconscionable inequality, fearful of myriad fundamentalisms’ cruel extremes, living with the consequence of a planet and a climate under duress: people, the world over, have the greater stake in the world’s future, far beyond the policy maker, the business mogul, the governor or even the humanitarian. After all, people are not governments’ problem, we are governments’ purpose. People are not just democracy’s end, we are its central means and our most renewable resource.

And, without the people’s civic action? There would have been no end to slavery. No address of HIV. No exposure of child sexual assault including that perpetrated in churches and in football clubs. No legislation against child marriage or rape in marriage. No access to emergency contraception. No protection of endangered species. No aspiration for gender parity in the work place. No climate change agreement. No transformation of the HIV/AIDs crisis. No worker’s rights or fair pay. No quality regulations for consumer goods. No disclosure of corruption.

Friends, civil society is the very milieu in which all non-governmental (and better governmental) human activity flourishes - and within its context the business of business too can flourish more sustainably, more inclusively, more fairly, more transparently. Where civic space is reduced and rule of law is weakened, economic and social enterprise business too face unstable operating environment, the rigged systems of corruption and fraud remain unchallenged and political instability flourishes.

When civil society is attacked, the market place for business – free and fair – is also assaulted. When human rights defenders are targeted, the possibilities for full and frank exchange between business and government is diminished, when freedoms of speech, association and assembly are trashed, initiative and innovation on which invention relies is a collateral casualty. When evidence and the rights to enjoyment of the fruits of science are assaulted, the interest of enterprise are insulted.

Berta Cáceres – murdered in Honduras 2016 for her work on indigenous rights, the environment and against developers breeching international law, should have been able to protest safely against practices directly affecting her and her community with which she disagreed, just as activists for sexual and reproductive rights and gender identity should not be criminalised. Theirs are not the problems ONLY for indigenous or environmental or LGBTI activists. By her death and their persecution, we all are shamed – whether leaders of government, captains of industry, priests of faith or scions of law. And when we w do not speak out – as indeed civil society has – we are made the lesser by our silence.

But in this reset, let us at least be clear – speaking out? It may be a most poor and withered thing – but even in the darkest cells of the cruelest prison; in fragile settlements perched high on a remote mountain top; at the centre of a resource depleted refugee camp - still there are those who stand up. It may be when shuffling along barely shoulder-wide alley ways of sprawling slums; it may be littered among the street workers, the market stall owners, in the mutterings of farm labours, chanting of indigenous people or calls of student protestors – but still there exists in every village, town and city – however sputtering, flickering, however overshadowed by coercive State power – still, there exists…. still you will find … those who stand – who stand up.

Go ahead. Torch every book. Char every page. Burn every word to ash. Try as you might. But, still we will stand. And therein lies our most renewable resource.

Today, violent extremism, and our responses to it, threaten so much and so many, once more. So once again, we must not allow fear and hate to push rights aside. The grave duty of States to uphold security must be matched by – be accompanied by - the grave duty of States to protect human dignity and human rights.

But for that we must all step up to where our fore mothers and fore fathers stood 70 years ago – who when faced with the gravest consequences of the most violent extremism the world has ever seen, drafted through the UDHR this promise and truth unassailable – that born we all are equal in dignity and rights: Like them, just as they did through the UDHR, we must first lower our fists, to extend our hands and then together again stand up for universal, indivisible human rights.



1 Jonathon Freedland, in The Guardian, 17/12/16