

**Implementing Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address
the COVID-19 Pandemic in Collaboration with the United Nations**

Addressing and Countering hate speech within and beyond COVID-19 context

Series of webinars – Concept Note

Background

On 18 June 2019, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres launched the [United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech](#) recognizing that there are growing trends of xenophobia, racism and intolerance, violent misogyny, anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred around the world. The strategy also recognizes that over the past 75 years, hate speech has been a precursor to atrocity crimes, including genocide, from Rwanda to Bosnia to Cambodia. Hate speech is in itself an attack on tolerance, inclusion, diversity and the very essence of our human rights norms and principles. The current COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated global trends of stigmatization, discrimination and hate speech.

As the United Nations Secretary-General has stated on many occasions, “COVID-19 does not care about who we are, where we live, what we believe or about any other distinction.” No country is immune to it. During the past months this pandemic continued to wreak havoc almost everywhere, crossing man-made borders, dividing communities and families, exposing and aggravating existing social and economic inequalities and increasing the risk for discrimination and violence based on multiple and often intersecting grounds, including race, colour, descent, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender or other identity factors. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the High Commissioner for Human Rights warned many times that the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups would be those most affected by the virus and its socio-economic consequences. In this context, certain political and religious leaders have exploited COVID-19 to spread hatred.

Hate speech including such occurring in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates underlying social and economic inequalities, reinforces and aggravates drivers of discrimination, violence and atrocity crimes, undermining social cohesion, solidarity and trust necessary to effectively tackle the spread of the virus.

Early April 2020, the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations warned against increasing global trends of COVID-19 related hate speech. At the same time, the Secretary-General has consistently stated that COVID-19 and its socio-economic consequences can be overcome only through enhanced cooperation and multilateralism. This is why on 11 April 2020, in his message to celebrate the beginning of the Holy Month of Ramadan, the Secretary-General called religious leaders and actors to support global efforts to fight the pandemic. Moreover, in his 8 May Global Appeal to Address and Counter COVID-19 related Hate Speech, the Secretary-General called political leaders, education institutions, religious actors and the media “for an all-out effort to end hate speech globally.”

Since then, many important initiatives have followed through. On 11 May 2020, the UN Office on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect (OSAPG) published a [Guidance Note on how to address and counter hate speech related to the COVID-19 pandemic](#). The Guidance Note is based on the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech. It calls influential figures in society, including religious leaders and faith actors, to actively speak out against COVID-19 related hate speech, misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories; express solidarity with targeted victims, and amplify messages that serve to reduce discrimination and stigmatization.

On 12 May 2020, the Kingdom of Morocco organized a virtual high-level conference on the role of religious leaders to address the multiple challenges related to the Coronavirus, including growing hate speech trends. Building on the Moroccan initiative and on the meeting that European Union Permanent Representatives held with the Secretary-General to encourage the United Nations to explore innovative ways to mobilize religious leaders and faith-based organizations in the response to COVID-19, on 28 May 2020 the OSAPG, the UNAOC and OHCHR organized a virtual consultation with a wide range of religious leaders and representatives of faith-based organizations (FBOs) to discuss thematic areas, actions and initiatives for a future Pledge for Action that could provide a result-oriented framework for collective action and enhanced collaboration between the United Nations and faith-based organizations.

This consultation resulted in the Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in collaboration with the United Nations. The Pledge includes a declaration by religious leaders and actors with assurances and commitments in response to COVID-19, and a mapping of ongoing activities and possible areas of collaboration with the United Nations. Addressing and countering COVID-19 related hate speech, interfaith dialogue and capacity-building figure prominently in the mapping both as cross-cutting issues and as specific areas where religious leaders and faith-based organizations are focusing their actions and responses to COVID-19.

In particular, the signatories to the Global Pledge commit themselves to “stand up and speak against hate speech and hate crimes, xenophobia, racism and all other forms of discrimination; and to work with the United Nations and all other relevant stakeholders to implement the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech and the UN Guidance on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech.”

With the objective of translating the Global Pledge into specific actions for further collaboration and enhanced partnership between the United Nations and faith actors, OSAPG, UNAOC and OHCHR will organize a series of webinars with religious and other relevant actors on hate speech and discrimination in the context of COVID-19 and beyond. Further to this general concept note, specific concept notes tailored to each webinar will follow.

Purpose

This series of webinars aims at stimulating a discussion with faith and other key actors on addressing and countering hate speech and discrimination related to COVID-19 and beyond. The linkages between hate speech, discrimination and violence will be explored. The series of webinars will particularly focus on exploring different forms of hate speech, aggravated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and discuss the impact thereof in particular on the most disadvantaged and marginalized population groups. The webinars will also identify ways to ensure the equal participation of those groups in all efforts geared towards countering hate speech against them. A gender lens will be applied by guiding the discussions through targeted questions and interventions regarding the forms and impact of hate speech during the COVID-19 pandemic on women’s rights and gender equality. Participants with experience working in the field to address these challenges will present good practices and lessons learnt, and identify specific action needed. Challenges and opportunities will be discussed, and options for follow-up and further collaboration will also be explored.

Each webinar could contain four main segments: (1) Opening remarks by co-hosts; (2) Presentation of grass root testimonies of alleged hate speech cases with a focus on best practices and lessons learned; (3) interactive discussion aimed at identifying options for collaboration; and (4) Closing.

Participants

1) Civil society actors defending Freedom of Expression, minority and vulnerable group’s rights, women’s rights and gender equality and combatting hate speech, including youth organizations and/or movements; 2) audio-visual and media actors; 3) law enforcement officials working in the area of hate speech, 4) religious actors and faith-based organizations.

Methodology and timeline

Peer to peer webinars. Six webinars of 1 ½ hours each will be organized in 2020 and 2021. The series will be concluded by a wrap-up session in June 2021. Exact dates will be communicated to the participants prior to each session with further details on thematic discussion and key speakers:

1. Gender equality (lead OHCHR): 7 December 2020
2. Hate speech (lead OSAPG): January 2021
3. Protection of religious sites (lead UNAOC): February 2021
4. Religious or belief minorities (lead OHCHR): March 2021
5. Preventing atrocity crimes (lead OSAPG): April 2021
6. Interfaith dialogue: Moderating the religious discourse (lead UNAOC): May 2021
7. Wrap-up webinar (joint lead): June 2021

Outcome

Each webinar will result in specific recommendations for actions tailored to enhance partnership between the target audience and the UN in the field of combating hate speech aggravated by the COVID-19 context. To reach meaningful outcomes, proposals should emanate from participants with long standing experience on this topic on the ground. For this purpose, human rights mechanisms, both at the regional and the UN level will be involved.

The outcomes of the webinars could result in a compilation of recommendations, best practices and lessons learned that would serve as a capacity-building tool to assist the work of relevant actors in addressing hate speech and to implement the Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in Collaboration with the United Nations.

Co-hosts

The series of webinars will be co-hosted by OSAPG, UNAOC and OHCHR. Each entity will take the lead in the organization of two webinars. It is recommended the series of webinars be organized under the framework of the implementation of the “Faith for Rights” Toolkit.

Policy framework for the series of webinars

A Joint call for Solidarity, Compassion and Unity, by Miguel Moratinos, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and Adama Dieng, the Special Advisor for the Prevention of Genocide

<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Joint%20Call%20By%20the%20High%20Rep%20UNAOC%20%20Special%20Advisor%20OSAPG%20March%2026.pdf>

Secretary-General Appeal for Global Ceasefire <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-03-23/secretary-generals-appeal-for-global-ceasefire>

Secretary-General Global Humanitarian Appeal to Combat COVID-19
https://www.google.com/search?q=SG+humanitarian+appeal+for+COVID&rlz=1C1GCEV_en&oq=SG+humanitarian+appeal&aqs=chrome.69i57j69i59.14214j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

Secretary-General Report on the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19, Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity

<https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/SG-Report-Socio-Economic-Impact-of-Covid19.pdf>

Global Multi-religious Faith-in-Action COVID initiative

https://www.google.com/search?q=SG+humanitarian+appeal+for+COVID&rlz=1C1GCEV_en&oq=SG+humanitarian+appeal&aqs=chrome.69i57j69i59.14214j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

“Faith for Rights” framework and #Faith4Rights toolkit

<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf>

<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/Faith4Rights.pdf>

The United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites

<https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/12-09-2019-UNAOC-PoA-Religious-Sites.pdf>

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech

https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf

Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-02/pope-francis-uae-declaration-with-al-azhar-grand-imam.html>

Statement of Solidarity from the New Alliance of Virtue

<https://www.allianceofvirtues.com/english/Solidarity.asp>

Joint Statement of the UN Interagency Multi Task Force for Religion and Sustainable Development

<https://www.unaoc.org/2020/04/joint-statement-interagency-task-force-on-religion-and-sustainable-development/>

Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes

https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/publications-and-resources/Plan_of_Action_Religious-rev5.pdf

SG Global Appeal to Address and Counter COVID-19 related Hate Speech:

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-05-08/appeal-address-and-counter-covid-19-hate-speech>

United Nations Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate speech

<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf>

Other relevant statements

UN expert warns against religious hatred and intolerance during COVID-19 outbreak

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25814&LangID=E>

Rise in antisemitic hatred during COVID-19 must be countered with tougher measures, says UN expert

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25800&LangID=E>