



## Concept Note

### **Interactive Webinar on the margins of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly**

#### ***“Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination: The Tearing of Our Societies”***

Tuesday, 29 September 2020 | 3:00 PM - 4:30 PM EDT

#### ***Background:***

The COVID-19 pandemic has torn across the world, affected all segments of the population indiscriminately regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, or gender, and continues to have far-reaching health and economic consequences. But for many, the impact extends beyond medical and financial concerns. The pandemic has exposed social and political fractures within communities, with discriminatory responses to fear, disproportionately affecting communities on the basis of their real or perceived national origin, skin color, or religion. Several political parties have latched into the COVID-19 crisis to advance anti-immigrant, white supremacist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic conspiracy theories that demonize minorities on the sheer basis of their religion, belief, or ethnicity.

Outbreaks create fear, and fear is a crucial ingredient for racism, xenophobia, and discrimination to thrive. This phenomenon manifests differently in different contexts and populations. Yet, there is a pattern in discriminatory acts: the target is generally the “other,” i.e., the migrant, someone belonging to a religious or ethnic minority, etc. These behavior patterns, not uncommon before the pandemic, often lead to the fragmentation of society. Racism and discrimination have detrimental effects not only on the safety and human dignity of those who are targeted but also on development, peace, and social cohesion. The United Nations Secretary-General has warned of the repercussions of these discriminatory manifestations urging for an inclusive, equitable, and universal response in addressing the pandemic<sup>1</sup>.

The position of the United Nations on racism and all its manifestations is crystal clear: this scourge violates the Charter of the United Nations and debases the core values upon which it was founded. The prohibition of racial discrimination is enshrined in all core international human rights instruments. It places obligations on States and tasks them with eradicating discrimination in public and private spheres. Therefore, it is imperative to promote tolerance, inclusion, and respect for diversity and stand up against racism, xenophobia, hate speech, and all forms of

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Secretary-General Policy Brief: COVID-19 and Human Rights  
[https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_policy\\_brief\\_on\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_covid\\_23\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf)

discrimination. The United Nations Secretary-General has made this a priority through launching initiatives such as the UN Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites<sup>2</sup>, the UN Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech<sup>3</sup>, which builds on the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech<sup>4</sup>.

***Framing the discussion:***

COVID-19 is attacking societies at their core. The pandemic has devastated many lives and upended livelihoods. But we should not let it destroy our core humanistic values. Allowing the pandemic to tear apart the fabric of our societies would be one of the most severe upheavals of COVID-19. Inclusion of and dialogue with communities and marginalized groups helps in rebuilding trust and enhancing social cohesion. In this context, the **United Nations Alliance of Civilizations** (UNAOC) is organizing a webinar to explore ways to scale-up a whole-of-society approach to prevent and counter the scourge of all forms of discrimination, xenophobia, and racism.

***Format:***

The panel will be convened in the format of an interactive discussion with speakers representing relevant UN entities, human rights experts, and other stakeholders, including the media. Speakers will give brief introductions (three minutes), and the moderator will conduct a tour-de-table.

***Key questions to be raised:***

- What are the challenges to forging a whole-of-society approach to end hate speech, racism, and all forms of discrimination locally and globally?
- What role can national governments and political institutions play to demonstrate support and solidarity with other relevant actors to strengthen social cohesion and combat xenophobia and other forms of discrimination while upholding international human rights law?
- What measures can media companies and especially social media service providers do to remove racist and xenophobic content without violating international human rights law? What are the challenges they face in doing so?
- Are the existing frameworks and instruments developed by the United Nations and relevant bodies sufficient to counter this phenomenon, or is there a need for more efficient, measurable, and results-oriented tools? How to enforce the existing tools?

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<sup>2</sup> 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>

<sup>3</sup> 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>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech: <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>

**Objectives:**

- Explore and discuss the impact of COVID-19 on our societies;
- Better understand the triggers and mechanisms of racism, xenophobia and discrimination in the current context;
- Identify good practices in fostering and ensuring social cohesion amid the pandemic.

**Moderator:**

- H.E. Mr. Miguel Angel Moratinos, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for UNAOC

**Panelists:**

- **Ms. Pramila Patten** @USGSRSGPatten  
Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (OSRSG-SVC), Acting Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (UN-OSAPG) @UN\_GP\_RtoP
- **Dr. Ahmed Shaheed** @ahmedshaheed  
Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
- **Mr. Jason Isaacson**  
Chief Policy and Political Affairs Officer, American Jewish Committee @AJCGlobal
- **Ms. Nayeli Chavez-Geller** @nayelichavezg  
New York Correspondent, Primer Impacto, Univisión
- **Mr. George Salama** (tbc)  
Head of Public Policy, Government, and Philanthropy – MENA Region, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, Twitter
- **Ms. Alex Walden** (tbc)  
Global Head of Human Rights, Google