

High-level Political Forum 2021

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

Virtual side event

7 July 2021

Background

The global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has turned into a socio-economic crisis as well as a human rights crisis rolled into one. It has exacerbated the vulnerability of the least protected in society. While the virus does not discriminate, its impacts do. Crises, including outbreaks of diseases, create anxiety and fear that are key ingredients for racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance to thrive. Hate speech is the most blatant manifestation of these phenomena. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, all regions have seen increased trends of hate speech based on ethnic and religious identity, as well as migration status. Xenophobia has surged online and in the streets. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have spread, and COVID-19-related anti-Muslim attacks have occurred. Migrants and refugees have been vilified as a source of the virus - and then denied access to medical treatment. In some countries, political leaders have used labels like “foreigner’s disease” to describe COVID-19, fueling stigmatization of minority groups, racism, xenophobia and related intolerance. Social media platforms have been misused to propagate hate and often incite violence.

In this context, on 8 May 2020, the UN Secretary-General launched a Global Appeal to Address and Counter COVID-19 related hate speech. The appeal included a call on civil society to strengthen outreach to vulnerable people, and religious actors to serve as models of mutual respect. Building on this appeal, the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (OSAPG), the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) convened on 28 May 2020 a group of religious leaders and actors and faith-based organizations to explore innovative ways to partner in the response to COVID-19 and discuss relevant thematic areas as well as possible actions and initiatives. 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](#)¹. 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 committed 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

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/GlobalPledgeAction.pdf>

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 organized a peer-to-peer learning programme. Six monthly webinars took place between December 2020 and May 2021, which focused on the role and experiences of faith actors in promoting gender equality, addressing hate speech, safeguarding religious sites, protecting religious or belief minorities, preventing atrocity crimes and facilitating and fostering interfaith dialogue & mutual respect . The webinars aimed to ensure gender balance in terms of participation and to highlight the contribution of women in the fight against hate speech. The webinars targeted participants with experience working in the field to address challenges related to COVID-19 and its socio-economic impacts and shared good practices and lessons learnt in this regard. Each webinar resulted in snapshots of learning points and recommendations that were compiled together. This compilation, that is publicly available,² provides the basis for further UN engagement with faith actors and civil society on combatting hate speech and its ramifications in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Purpose of this side event

One year from the launch of the Global Pledge, this side event aims to take stock of and advocate for further implementation of the Global Pledge for Action and to share experiences of religious actors’ engagement at grassroots level in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts, in particular hate speech and its ramifications. Challenges and opportunities encountered so far in the implementation of the Global Pledge for Action and options for further action and collaboration will also be explored.

Interlinkages between the side event, SDGs and 2021 HLPF

In the Global Pledge for Action, religious actors and faith-based organizations reiterated their role and responsibility in bringing people together to strengthen our common humanity, solidarity, compassion and equality, especially in response to the multi-faceted challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the short, medium and longer terms. In particular, they pledged to cooperate with relevant UN entities, as well as international and regional human rights mechanisms, to enhance the human rights knowledge of religious actors at the grass root level, engage with them in recovery efforts and exchange experiences in a peer-to-peer learning mode. This may also contribute to building an inclusive and effective path to sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, in particular for the achievement of SDGs 10, 16 and 17.

Methodology

This is an interactive peer-to-peer learning event. Participants in the six webinars will be invited to share their feedback on their learning experience from the series of webinars, as well as

² <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/FrameworkInAction.aspx>

challenges and opportunities for the implementation of the Global Pledge going forward and options for further action and collaboration.

Audience

This virtual event is open. Attendance of religious actors and faith-based organizations, as well as civil society organizations defending freedom of opinion and expression, minority and vulnerable group's rights, women's rights and gender equality, and combatting hate speech, including youth organizations is highly encouraged. The event will also provide space for the voices of representatives of grassroots working on the ground in promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue. The opening panel of the side event will ensure geographic and gender balance, including speakers from the United Nations, States, civil society and academia.

Co-hosts

The virtual event will be co-organized by OSAPG, UNAOC and OHCHR, and co-sponsored by the Permanent Missions of the Kingdom of Morocco and Croatia, and Religions for Peace.

Background documents

- [Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in Collaboration with the United Nations](#)
- [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](#)
- [Secretary-General Appeal for Global Ceasefire](#)
- [Secretary-General Global Humanitarian Appeal to Combat COVID-19](#)
- [Secretary-General Report on the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19, Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity](#)
- [Global Multi-religious Faith-in-Action COVID initiative](#)
- [“Faith for Rights” framework and #Faith4Rights toolkit](#)
- [The United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites](#)
- [The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech](#)
- [Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together](#)
- [Statement of Solidarity from the New Alliance of Virtue](#)

- [Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes](#)
- [SG Global Appeal to Address and Counter COVID-19 related Hate Speech](#)
- [United Nations Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate speech](#)
- [Joint Statement of the UN Interagency Multi Task Force for Religion and Sustainable Development](#)
- [UN expert warns against religious hatred and intolerance during COVID-19 outbreak](#)
- [Rise in antisemitic hatred during COVID-19 must be countered with tougher measures, says UN expert](#)