

Never Again! The United Nations Commemorates the Holocaust

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2008 marks the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And yet, in spite of the global consensus about the centrality of human rights, the world community has not always honored the legal frameworks that were designed to protect the rights of all citizens. The United Nations, an institution created by the allied victors of World War II, has until recently been silent about the historical event that led to its founding, the Holocaust. Fortunately, this situation has changed.

Last Sunday, the United Nations launched a week of programs dedicated to educating both the UN staff and the world community that the death of an estimated 6 million Jews by the Nazi regime was the cruelest act of inhumanity and that the UN leadership would no longer tolerate member states who would deny that such an event took place.

Credit must go to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who marked the opening of this year's International Day in Memory of Holocaust Victims on January 27 (the date of the liberation of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp) with the strong statement, "to those who claim that the Holocaust never happened, or has been exaggerated, we respond by reiterating our determination to honor the memory of every innocent man, woman, and child murdered at the hands of the Nazis and their accomplices." He went on to warn the UN community by calling on member states to maintain a "sense of vigilance" and use all measures to thwart intolerance from happening at that level again.

Three years ago, the government of Israel introduced its first UN General Assembly resolution (A/RES/60/7) asking countries to reject any full or partial denial of the Holocaust and condemn "all manifestations of religious intolerance, incitement, harassment, or violence against persons or communities based on ethnic origin or religious belief." With 103 countries backing this resolution, and with strong U.S. government support, the United Nations finally had a legal means of silencing those who would deny history.

In 2007, when Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad questioned the existence of the impact of the Holocaust, the pronouncement generated a new sense of urgency to act, and UN member states responded by finally speaking out. Secretary-General Ban's statement this week makes it clear to all that the centrality of genocide prevention to the UN human rights mission must remain at the top of this year's agenda. It also underscores the meaning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Whether this week's events will ultimately help advance the protection of men, women, and children in Darfur remains a challenge to those of us who see in this multilateral forum the entry point for the United States, and the other five permanent members of the UN Security Council, to rededicate its energies to supporting legal norms to end the horrors of war, the impunity of states, and truly put into practice the responsibility to protect others as a tool of international smart power.

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