



**PERMANENT MISSION OF SINGAPORE
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

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**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
60TH SESSION**

40TH PLENARY MEETING

STATEMENT BY

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TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

ON

**HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE
(DRAFT RESOLUTION A/60L.12)**

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1 The Indian Ocean Tsunami Disaster in December last year claimed the lives of some 275,000 from 35 different countries. Less than a year later, at least another 50,000 lives were taken by a 7.6-magnitude earthquake across South Asia. Behind the numbers, each death is a tragic story of a human life suddenly taken, a family left behind to grieve the loss, or in many cases a whole family wiped out in one fell swoop. The international community reacted in both cases with solidarity to help affected countries that needed external assistance. The fearsome ability of natural disasters, such as tsunamis and earthquakes, to devastate, in mere moments, entire areas and to exterminate entire communities sparked serious discussions on what the international community could and should do to save lives when such calamities occur.

2 Today, we meet in this august General Assembly Hall, to remember the many victims, not of an act of nature but of one of the worst and most cruel acts of evil inflicted by man upon mankind. Regrettably, there had been other such shameful episodes in the past, and also since then, committed against peoples of other religions or ethnicities even if the acts committed were not executed in similar fashion. The key lesson that "We, the peoples of the United Nations" should have learnt from such episodes is to never – truly never again – allow genocides, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity to recur. Just as we condemn the frequent acts of terrorism these days that kill innocent people, we need to similarly recognise that there is no justification whatsoever for criminal acts like the Holocaust to be committed, and that it is important for us to act to prevent such crimes. My delegation was, therefore much encouraged that our Leaders, in coming together for the recent High-Level Plenary Meeting, had, for the first time, accepted "the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity", and to act according to it. As they put it in the final Outcome Document, "This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including their incitement, through appropriate and necessary means." They added that "the international community should, as appropriate, encourage and help States to exercise this responsibility and support the United Nations in establishing an early warning capability."

3 On this solemn occasion, we remember the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. But the bigger picture goes beyond just Germany and the Jews. The cathartic actions that post-war Germany had taken, not least to acknowledge with contrition and to etch into the collective German memory the wrongs that Nazi Germany had done to Jews and others, leave little doubt that German society as a whole has sincerely learnt the lesson of history and come to terms with it. And contrary to what some may contend, this is not about shaming or holding responsible future generations of Germans for their forefathers' doing. Rather, this is about the need for a society to "programme" a lesson learnt into its collective memory lest history not learnt may be doomed to repeat itself. My delegation would urge all societies that know of and have committed similar wrongs in their past, be it in peace or in war, against peoples of other religions or ethnicities to recognise wrong where wrong had been done, and to take active steps to come to terms with history and to "internalise" such lessons into their collective memory. We would also submit that these lessons of history are instructional for all peoples, so that from the mistakes of others that had led them down the slippery slope of discrimination, envy, prejudice and hatred, we can learn to avoid - and to work together to avert - similar inexcusable pitfalls and crimes. In this regard, advocacy of bigoted views, such as to deny the

right of a people or a State to exist is highly dangerous and completely unacceptable in this modern age.

4 The Holocaust had occurred in part because it became fashionable in some quarters, leveraging on the media of mass propaganda, to put the blame on the people of one faith and descent as convenient scapegoats for all sorts of injustices that then existed. At the same time, while many did not agree with the Nazis, they felt cowed or otherwise chose to remain silent. This is why we cannot afford to be complacent. Upon any sign of ethnic or religious defamation, we need to act early, to warn strongly against the danger. We need to also actively promote greater understanding to dispel misconceptions about others who are not like us but whose presence in this globalised world we can no longer afford to ignore. It is all too natural that we tend to prefer other people to be like ourselves in our way of life, our outlook and our values. So when a minority differs from the majority, all too often in the name of "integration" held up as an existential *raison d'être*, the majority expects the minority to become more like them and conform to their socio-cultural norms. The minority is subjected to a process of assimilation, and *in extremis* forced to accept by imposition the majority's system of values and beliefs. Even if the underlying intention might be entirely noble, for example, so that they could enjoy access to work, education, justice or to political participation all conducted in the ways of the majority, it is certainly misplaced. A wiser approach would be to work out a *modus vivendi* to accommodate the minority and to live with one another. It is a huge affront to one's dignity to be regarded as having no values, or be urged to jettison one's system of values, beliefs and way-of-life as being inferior or wrong, in favour of another system. The majority should always ask themselves how they would feel if the tables were turned and they were in the shoes of the minority. It is not for nothing that great and wise men of the past had counselled us "not to do unto others what we do not want others to do unto ourselves".

5 Indeed, the ingredients of fostering misunderstanding and hatred remain prevalent in the world today. It is striking to my delegation that even in this global age of information, how little some of us understand about others, even those living just across our borders or amongst us, who are of a different race, ethnicity, culture, or creed. Ignorance breeds suspicions and phobias. The tendency of modern mass media to generalise, caricaturise and sensationalise in order to sell news, does not help matters. Stereotyping contributes to wrongful entrenching of baseless fears and mis-profiling of cultural and religious beliefs and practices. We owe it to ourselves and to our posterity to urgently educate ourselves about others. This is the very rationale underlying the repeated calls for a dialogue among civilisations. And what better dialogue can we have than for all the movers and shakers and force multipliers of global information, in particular the mass media of all stripes, to get their basic understanding of all major cultures and religions right so that they can put out information in a more objective manner. My delegation would submit that the greater influence one has, especially the mass media, the greater is one's special responsibility and role to promote understanding and avoid unwittingly fanning the flames of fear and prejudice that may seed the next conflict along the faultlines of race, culture, faith or civilisations. We cannot be complacent and need to work at preserving the harmony that underpins the fabric and foundations of our global society.

6 Singapore is a small multi-racial, multi-religious city-state. Singaporeans do not share a common cultural heritage, but we have nevertheless managed to live and work together harmoniously for 40 years since independence. This is because we recognise our diversity and the value of co-operation and harmony. Our Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, Arab, Jewish and other communities draw on our traditional cultures to build a common future through mutual understanding, tolerance and accommodation. However, this has not lulled us into complacency. Countries with a multi-ethnic population and a longer history have broken up because of ethnic conflicts. We realise from our own past, and from more recent experiences of racial and religious strife elsewhere involving physical assaults and attacks on places of worship, how vulnerable our own social fabric is. We take care to ensure that there is justice and equality regardless of race, language or religion, and we do not and will not condone any acts that stir up strife along racial or religious lines. As my Foreign Minister said in his statement during the general debate:

“Tribalism is a basic human instinct. We may proclaim that all men are brothers but we reflexively distinguish degrees of closeness. Divisions of race, language, culture and religion run deep in human society and surface under stress.”

7 Beyond taking a cautious approach, we have decided to celebrate our diversity in our daily life, to turn what may seem an adversity into opportunity. We encourage all Singaporeans to see the inherent value of diversity. As the world moves from globalisation towards "glocalisation" or global localisation, our unique knowledge of cultural software, which has enabled us to network easily with both East and West, Europe, America, China, India and the Middle East can command a premium when people realise that Singaporeans, as intermediaries, can make a huge difference to their business success through fostering better understanding and trust as well as interpreting and explaining how each distinct culture works. In our own small ways, at the international level such as at the United Nations, we hope to also contribute to greater understanding of the vital need for tolerance and dialogue towards building a better and more stable world for our children.

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