

**INTERFAITH COUNCIL OF SOUTHWESTERN CONNECTICUT'S
ANNUAL RAMADAN IFTAR**

Stamford - Union Baptist Church, Saturday 17 June 2017

Keynote Address by Mr. Adama Dieng, Under Secretary-General

United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

Brothers and Sisters in Humanity,

I would like to start by thanking Imam Adeeb Kareem for inviting me to deliver a Keynote speech on the occasion of this Annual Ramadan Iftar. As we were reminded by the Honourable Senator Christopher S. Murphy, “the month of Ramadan is a period of intense introspection and engagement with one’s spirituality.” I couldn’t miss the opportunity of joining you to celebrate diversity. I wish we could see many initiatives like yours in all parts of the USA and around the World.

My first encounter with the Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut (IFC) was through the Mapping of existing activities conducted by my Office in the framework of a project I initiated two years ago. We were fortunate to benefit from the eminent contribution made by Imam Adeeb Kareem during the Regional Forum we organised in Washington DC. The Forum brought together Religious leaders and actors from North and South America. I will tell you more about this world wide initiative. For those who are not familiar with my work, let me simply say that the Office of the Special Adviser for the Prevention of genocide was

established by the United Nations Secretary General in 2004 as a result of the failure of the International Community in Rwanda and Srebrenica. The key functions of the Office were envisaged to include the following:

- a. the collection of existing information on massive and serious violations of human rights which, if not prevented or halted might lead to genocide,
- b. acting as a catalyst of early warning to the Secretary General and the Security Council on potential situations that could result into genocide.
- c. making recommendations on actions to prevent or halt genocide and liaise with the United Nations system on activities for the prevention of genocide.

However, the role of the Special Adviser is not to make the determination whether genocide has occurred or not; rather his or her role is to enable the international community to act in a timely manner and thus any repeat performance of genocide. Unfortunately, we live in a world where the risk of genocide and other atrocity crimes remains very real and it is important that we continue to have the space to assess how we can succeed in preventing what is known as “the crime of crimes”.

Over the last few years we have witnessed loss of life on a massive scale - including in the Central African Republic, Darfur, Iraq, North Korea, Syria and Ukraine – as a result of large-scale violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. In addition to lives lost, the other consequences of these crises are devastating. Millions of people have been forced to leave their homes, losing everything. Many have sought sanctuary in other countries, placing a strain on their resources as they do what they can to help them.

We also need to focus much more on early prevention. Preventing genocide does not mean waiting to respond until we can identify the crime unfolding as the crime of genocide. Genocide does not happen overnight. It is a process that requires planning, and usually develops through different stages. We need to understand what factors contribute or may present a risk of genocide, and which structural and operational factors can leave a population vulnerable or, alternatively, help to protect it. We also need to understand the different kinds of measures that can be taken to prevent tensions between groups from escalating into genocidal conflicts.

Genocide is an extreme form of identity-based conflict. To prevent genocide we need to attack prejudice in all its forms, and the spread of hatred and hostility that is based on ethnicity, religion, or any other form of identity. This hatred is so dangerous. Last week's events in Washington were a tragic manifestation of the challenges we face. I believe that education and strong leadership are both keys to tackling this challenge. Educating the next generations to see the values and benefits of diversity is fundamental. Our youth represent the cornerstone of our future. Strong leadership on this issue is crucial, also. The immediate and principled responses of political and religious leaders in 2015 to condemn not only the action of terrorists but also anti-Muslim rhetoric were particularly welcome.

Tonight, I would like to speak more specifically about the prevention of incitement to violence and, in particular, about the role of religious leaders and actors in this regard. My remarks will thus have three main parts. I will first speak about incitement to violence and how it relates to atrocity crimes. I will then speak about the prevention of incitement as a tool to prevent atrocity crimes. Finally, I

will explore the role of religious leaders and actors in preventing incitement to violence.

Brothers and Sisters in Humanity,

Although fewer wars are being waged today, the number of conflict deaths has increased threefold since 2008, given the intensification of violence and the erosion of respect for principles of international humanitarian and human rights law. In many instances, attacks against populations have been so serious that we believe they may constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity and even, in some cases, even genocide, the crimes we refer to as atrocity crimes. We are seeing a worrying retreat from a global commitment to collective action to protect populations and a cynical assertion of the right to place national interests above moral, legal and political commitments.

We are also seeing the widespread use of messages – in public discourse and the media – to incite hatred and hostility against individuals and communities, based on their identity and, in the worst cases, encouraging or inciting violence.

The term “incitement to violence” is included in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which in article 20 (2) prohibits “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.” Incitement to violence refers to any communication that creates a risk of violence against an individual or target group. Incitement can take various forms, including political speeches and flyers, media articles, social media communications and visual arts products. It can be subtle, or blatant.

Advocacy of hatred through any means nourishes bigotry, suspicion and mistrust, and has the power to divide societies and provoke violence. In recent

years, it has contributed to violence in all regions of the world - Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Much research has been done in recent years into the links between hate speech, incitement and acts of violence, including by researchers working with the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

We know that for acts of incitement to result in violence, specific elements need to be present, including a context that is conducive to violence; an influential speaker – in other words a speaker whom people respect and respond to; a speech act that is widely disseminated; a receptive audience; and a target – and the target is usually individuals or groups with a specific ethnic, national, religious, political, sexual orientation or gender identity. For an act to constitute incitement to violence, there must be an intent on the part of the speaker to engage in advocacy for and cause violence. There also needs to be a certain degree of likelihood that the act may result in the violence that it calls for. Finding the means to diffuse, counter and prevent incitement; “immunize” the audience so that hate speech and incitement have no impact; and present alternative messages can help to prevent violence that can lead to atrocity crimes.

Incitement to violence has become a common element of atrocities committed worldwide. It is both a trigger and an early warning sign of atrocities. In situations that have not yet escalated into violence, incitement to discrimination and hostility contributes to sowing the seeds of suspicion, mistrust and intolerance and building tensions between communities that can be hard to defuse. As the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes developed by my office underlines, increased inflammatory rhetoric, propaganda campaigns or hate speech targeting particular communities or individuals, based on their identity, contribute to

enabling or preparing atrocity crimes, and are indicators that those crimes are likely to be committed.

In this context, reacting to the presence of hate speech and incitement in societies divided along identity lines and in situations where tensions are high can contribute to early warning and prevention efforts.

Brothers and Sisters in Humanity,

In our efforts to prevent and counter incitement to violence, it is important to consider which actors are most influential. Of course, the State has the primary responsibility to prevent incitement to violence – and political leaders have a great influence over populations. They thus have a particular responsibility to condemn any discourse that could constitute incitement to violence and all hate crimes. However, the State is not the only actor with influence. Religious leaders can have a strong influence over the behaviour of those who follow their faith and share their beliefs in many parts of the world. When they speak out, their followers listen.

Religious leaders can use their influence in either positive or negative ways. We have seen that some have used their position to spread hateful messages that have incited violence. Many others, however, have been responsible for preventing and countering violence and its incitement by spreading messages of peace, tolerance, acceptance and respect.

For this reason, I decided to work more closely with these eminent actors and over the last two years, have engaged with religious leaders across the world in a process that we refer to as the “Fez Process”.

The Fez Process refers to a unique series of consultations organised by my Office between April 2015 and December 2016, in collaboration with a range of partners. Those who contributed to these consultations included religious leaders, faith-based and secular organizations, as well as government officials, regional organizations, UN agencies and subject matter experts. The consultations were hosted by the Governments of Ethiopia, Morocco, Italy, Jordan, Thailand and the United States.

The first consultation took place in April 2015 in Fez, Morocco, with the support of KAICIID and the Government of Morocco, and included senior religious leaders from different faiths and religions from around the world. The constructive discussions that took place in Fez led to the development of a draft declaration of principles - also called the “Fez Declaration” - and a draft Plan of Action for religious leaders and actors to prevent incitement that could lead to atrocity crimes - called the “Fez Plan of Action”. The regional consultations served to develop context specific regional strategies for religious leaders and actors to prevent incitement to violence – also called regional plans of actions - and served to refine the Fez Plan of Action.

In all, a total of 232 religious leaders and actors from 77 countries, including the United States, took part in the consultations. Participants included Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Sikhs from different groups and denominations, as well as representatives from various religious minorities, including Bahai, Kakai, Yazidi, and Candomblé, and humanists. At least 30 percent of participants at all meetings were women. It was a challenge to identify the right people to bring to the table – we wanted to include participants with a whole range of views, not only those who agreed with us. We were not searching for a comfortable discussion, but one that would be both challenging and

productive. I believe we succeeded. I certainly came out richer from these consultations.

The outcome of the Fez Process is a consolidated *“Plan of Action for religious leaders and actors to prevent and counter incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes.”* The recommendations in the Plan of Action are relevant both from an early warning perspective and when crises are imminent.

There are three sets of recommendations. The first focuses on prevention, recommending specific actions to prevent and counter incitement to violence; prevent violent extremism and prevent and counter gender-based violence. The second focuses on strengthening societal resilience by enhancing education and capacity building; strengthening collaboration with traditional and new media; strengthening engagement with regional and international partners and fostering interfaith and intra-faith dialogue. The third sets out recommendations on ways to establish peaceful, inclusive and just societies through respecting, protecting and promoting human rights and establishing networks of religious leaders.

Brothers and Sisters in Humanity,

Of note, fundamental to the whole Plan of Action is the respect and promotion of international human rights standards, in particular the right to freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of religion and belief and the right to peaceful association.

The Plan of Action is a pioneering document, as it is the first to engage with faith leaders to develop context specific strategies to prevent incitement that could lead to atrocity crimes. It will be officially launched at a meeting chaired by the Secretary-General on 14 July in New York, and will be followed by meetings with

Member States and a range of organisations interested in supporting its implementation.

I strongly believe that the implementation of the Plan of Action can contribute to the prevention of atrocity crimes, especially in areas affected by religious and sectarian tensions and violence. However, it is far more likely to succeed if it has political support. In this context, I hope that the United States, as a champion of peace and security worldwide, as well as of freedom of religion and belief, will support the implementation of the Plan of Action, both in the United States and in other parts of the world.

I will end on that note. I look forward to discussing with the Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut on how we can work together to prevent incitement and the violence it encourages.

Thank you.