

DG/2003/074  
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

Director-General  
of the United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

at the Second International Conference on  
“Educating for Tolerance: the Case of Resurgent Antisemitism”

UNESCO, 12 May 2003

Distinguished Guests,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure to welcome you all most warmly to UNESCO this evening. In my view, UNESCO is truly the House of Tolerance within the United Nations system and it is therefore most fitting that this Conference is being held here. We are glad of the opportunity to cooperate once again with the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, which has organized this event. It promises to be a most interesting and rewarding conference whose theme – “Educating for Tolerance: The Case of Resurgent Antisemitism” – is clearly important to us all.

The Wiesenthal Centre bears the name of a man who fought an unrelenting battle over many decades against impunity and the loss of memory of the Holocaust. Simon Wiesenthal has received many tributes for his investigation of war crimes and his search for justice. May it please be noted that last year, he and the Wiesenthal Centre received Honourable Mention in the award of the UNESCO/Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence in recognition of “their denunciation of the crimes committed by the Nazis during the Second World War and their work in education for tolerance and non-violence”.

I wish to acknowledge the special character of this opening panel. Among us is the former Soviet refusenik, Natan Sharansky, who is now Israel’s Minister for Diaspora Affairs. Also, we have with us Mr Nicolas Sarkozy, France’s Minister of the Interior, in which capacity he has a vital role in the maintenance of inter-communal stability and civility in our host country. We are joined by the top human rights official in the United Nations, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Sergio Vieira de Mello, who has important personal experience of re-building broken societies in Kosovo, East Timor and elsewhere. In addition, we are pleased to welcome Congressman Robert Beauprez of Colorado, who represents the United States at this event. Last but not least, I welcome Rabbi Marvin Hier, the Dean and founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Los Angeles, California.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now briefly provide some background that places this conference in context. In 1991, Simon Wiesenthal visited Paris and came to UNESCO to discuss the then new phenomenon of neo-Nazi antisemitic computer games which were circulating in Europe. This visit resulted in an invitation to the

Wiesenthal Centre to organize the First International Conference on “Educating for Tolerance: The Case of Resurgent Antisemitism”, which was held at UNESCO Headquarters in June 1992. Subsequently, the Centre invited UNESCO, in the person of the serving Director-General, to inaugurate its Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, which duly took place in February 1993.

In 1994, the Simon Wiesenthal Centre entered into official relations with UNESCO, which facilitated our collaboration in subsequent years. Indeed, three conferences were organized by the Centre under the auspices of UNESCO in the years that followed: “From Xenophobia to Tolerance: Jews and Moslems in Europe and Beyond” in Paris in 1995; “Migrantophobia, Caucasophobia and Antisemitism” in Moscow in 1996; and “Kosovo in the Mirror of Auschwitz” in Vienna in 1997.

In July 2002, at our Headquarters here in Paris, I met with Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Deputy Dean of the Wiesenthal Centre, to discuss its relations of cooperation with UNESCO. We agreed on that occasion to convene a follow-up conference in order to undertake an up-dated status check on antisemitism and to propose programmatic guidelines for containing its spread.

This second conference will not only analyze the phenomenon of antisemitism, but will also address the responsibilities of parliaments, academics and scholars, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Internet providers as actors in the campaign for tolerance. Cases will be presented as models of good practice to show what can be done: for example, the “Tools for Tolerance” hands-on educational project in California; the “SOS Truth and Security” grassroots campaign in the Paris suburbs; the European Network Against Racism as a lobby against hate; and a German pastor’s approach to changing skinhead attitudes in Brandenburg.

In addition, eminent clergymen and lay religious authorities will discuss “Tolerance as an Act of Faith - Different Paths, One Destination”, with a view to agreeing upon ethical standards in this area. This discussion will be very much in keeping with UNESCO’s own role as a forum for meaningful inter-cultural dialogue oriented towards building a better future.

We would expect the invited experts to analyze, from an educational perspective, the various experiences aimed at promoting tolerance and mutual understanding and, in particular, the good practices that contribute effectively to the fight against intolerance and discrimination.

We hope that the conference will promote a greater awareness among the general public, scientific and cultural communities, the media, civil society

institutions and decision-makers about the resurgence of antisemitism and its pernicious effects on the education of children and young people. This should lead to the elaboration of concrete proposals and recommendations to be submitted to UNESCO and other international organizations, NGOs and national institutions.

An effort will be made to disseminate the results of this conference to the public at large and, in the process, to raise the awareness of decision-makers at national and international levels, including the entire United Nations system, of the importance of debate on the adverse effects of antisemitism. The conference should improve anticipation by UNESCO and its Member States of the main foreseeable dangers of antisemitism, racism, intolerance and fanaticism, in order to facilitate the formulation of early warning strategies and policies to provide timely preventive responses.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For its part, UNESCO will continue to challenge the spread of antisemitism. In this effort, all of our fields of competence – education, culture, the sciences, information and communication – have made a contribution. But we look especially to education as the key means whereby not only the value of tolerance but also its practice can be promoted and strengthened. Education for peace, tolerance and mutual understanding is a vital tool for promoting the acquisition of relevant knowledge, values, attitudes and capabilities by all learners, especially young people. Properly conducted, such education aimed at “learning to live together” should help learners to find out for themselves, to judge for themselves and to think for themselves. For UNESCO, such considerations go to the heart of what the quality of education is all about. This conference, furthermore, acquires additional significance by being seen as a contribution to the UN Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010), for which UNESCO is the lead agency.

Since its foundation, UNESCO has been committed to combating antisemitism as part of its attempt to prevent ignorance, prejudice, suspicion and mistrust from turning the world into a battleground. Our long-standing commitment to promoting tolerance and mutual understanding between individuals, communities and peoples is as strong as ever. Today, that commitment manifests itself in several ways but especially, perhaps, in the cultivation of dialogue between different civilizations, cultures and religions.

Tolerance, an essential dimension of all inter-cultural dialogue, is a fundamental moral principle which, to be understood fully, must also be seen as an attitude of mind, as a concrete form of everyday conduct and as an active

embrace of human difference. Today, the word “tolerance” goes beyond its customary meaning as a kind of enlightened disagreement or a reluctant acceptance of “the other” based on sufferance. The ‘Declaration of Principles of Tolerance’ agreed by UNESCO’s Member States at the 28<sup>th</sup> session of the General Conference in November 1995 states that “tolerance is not concession, condescension or indulgence”. Instead, considered more positively, tolerance is “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human”. As “harmony in difference”, tolerance is defined as “above all, an active attitude prompted by recognition of the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others”.

This understanding of tolerance was reflected in Simon Wiesenthal’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly as Austria’s delegate to the special session dedicated to the 1995 Year of Tolerance. In his presentation, he characterized tolerance as “the minimum point of departure”, that is, a first step in mutual acknowledgment that, once achieved, must be built upon in order to further ensure mutual respect for the human dignity of “the other”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We know from history that intolerance and hatred, left unchecked, can have devastating consequences. In April 2001, I visited the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps in Poland, which is now a memorial to the hundreds of thousands who died and suffered there. It was a particularly moving occasion for me, one that I shall never forget. It is in the perspective of the Holocaust that the recent resurgence of antisemitism is so deeply troubling. This development, which is taking a variety of forms, reminds us that antisemitism is not an illness that heals itself but must be addressed directly and strenuously if its spread is to be curbed.

In this context, it is vital that all domestic communities - whether ethnic, religious or national diasporas - are assured the right to coexist in social harmony regardless of conflicts between countries with which they may identify emotively, spiritually or nostalgically. Inter-communal relations must be decoupled from such international affinities or conflicts as a first step to containing the growth of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other expressions of hatred and intolerance.

What is really needed is a palpable increase in dialogue and civility between different communities, cultures, civilizations and religions. In November 2001, towards the end of the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Resolution on the “Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations”. The General Assembly

looked in particular to UNESCO to encourage and facilitate dialogue among civilizations and to formulate ways and means to promote such dialogue in the activities of the United Nations in various fields. I can assure you that we are actively fulfilling this responsibility in a number of ways, including this very conference.

I sincerely hope that this meeting will help to light the way towards greater mutual understanding and trust.

Thank you.