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Africa: An All-Out Fight Against Hate Speech



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Alice Nderitu, UN Special Adviser on Genocide, briefs reporters ahead of International Day of Countering Hate Speech (18 June, 2022).

Africa Renewal (United Nations) (<http://www.un.org/africarenewal>)

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INTERVIEW

By Zipporah Musau

Engaging tech and social media companies, leaders, communities to fight vice

The world is experiencing alarming trends of growing hate speech, racism, xenophobia, misogyny and hatred. Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu is the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide. One of her priorities is to counter hate speech. She spoke to Africa Renewal's Zipporah Musau on what the UN is doing to counter hate speech. Here are excerpts:

One of the mandates of your office is countering hate speech. What would you describe as hate speech and how can we counter it?

There is no international legal definition for hate speech. However, we have the UN definition contained in the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, launched by Secretary General Antonio Guterres in 2019.

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, defines hate speech as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender, or other forms of identity."

This definition provides guidance to the entire UN system on how to tackle hate speech in a holistic way through this plan of action.

Due to the lack of an international definition, hate speech that does not reach the threshold of incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence for which legal standards exist is difficult to handle, and hence remains widespread online and offline.

The characterization of what is hateful is sometimes controversial and disputed depending on global contexts. At the UN, we advocate for relevant stakeholders, including social media companies, to adopt the UN definition for instances of hate speech that do not reach the threshold of incitement. [English \(7\)](#)

In line with this, the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech recognizes that hate speech can be very dangerous and contributes to an environment of marginalization, discrimination and even violence. [\(/commerce/user/manage/\)](#) [En Français \(https://fr.allafrica.com/\)](https://fr.allafrica.com/)

Often people speak about hate speech in context, for example, in the USA, where freedom of expression is held so strongly, there is always pushback against using the term 'hate speech' and arguments are often put forward on there being a thin line between freedom of speech and expression that constitutes hate speech.

According to the UN, hate speech is any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender, or other forms of identity. This provides guidance to the entire UN system on how to tackle hate speech in a holistic way and we have the UN plan of action

The Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred, however, addresses this issue and draws a clear line between freedom of expression and incitement to hatred and violence. The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech also sets out a framework for tackling hate speech holistically, from the root causes and grievances driving it, to its impact on victims and societies.

The Strategy is being implemented across the UN system, but its real value in preventing violence and saving lives depends on the engagement of many -- including Governments, civil society actors and individual champions.

What triggers hate speech and why should we care?

When hate speech begins as stereotypes, people may initially see it as harmless, but it doesn't always end up as so. We do need to care because there is no genocide in which hate speech was not a precursor, no genocide which was not accompanied by hate speech.

Hate speech is used to dehumanize people targeted for genocide. We must all understand that hate speech is the foundation for genocide.

There shouldn't be tolerance for hate speech or ethnic, racial, or religious stereotyping.

We know for instance that to perpetuate the genocide in Rwanda against the Tutsi, they were profiled as insects - cockroaches - that needed to be killed. Often people do not understand that the portrayal of the Tutsi people in this dehumanizing way is hate speech.

When we think of how often we hear hate speech in those kinds of stereotypes around the world, with people referred to as weeds that need to be uprooted, as cancers that need to be removed, then we know there are lessons the world needs to learn.

There are also lessons to learn, even as we acknowledge that social media was created to get people to engage with each other yet at the same time, hate speech can be amplified through social media.

We should pay attention and act on the amplification of hate speech through media and all these common mediums, that amplify voices.

How are you engaging tech and social media companies in the UN strategy against hate speech?

Last October, I briefed the UN Security Council on the topic of tech and social media companies and hate speech. I invited these big companies - including Facebook, Google, Twitter, Tik Tok, Apple, YouTube.

We have been meeting with and engaging these companies periodically to discuss how we can collectively do better in containing hate speech.

We tell these tech and social media companies that hate speech has proliferated online and that they have amplified this phenomenon. We tell them the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate We recognize that tackling hate speech is not something that the UN can do on its own, but something that requires concerted efforts and partnership with all relevant stakeholders.

The role of social media companies

The Plan of Action acknowledges tech and social media companies as key partners to address and counter hate speech. Social media platforms provide an important avenue for individuals and communities to engage.

The United Nations is fully committed to partner with these companies to address and counter hate speech in line with international human rights standards.

This is the conversation that I took to the UN Security Council, and by doing so made public what we had been discussing with tech and social media companies. We talked about how hate speech has increased - especially the reach and speed through which it is spread.

A survey launched in early 2021 by my office with the UN Working Group on Hate Speech to assess implementation of the UN hate speech strategy indicated that many UN entities are engaging with social media companies to address and counter hate speech in line with their respective mandates.

Minority groups or those perceived to be different, continue to be targets and victims of hate speech. These groups continue to be scapegoated for challenges faced by communities or countries. For example, we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic the escalation on hate speech against minorities.

Hate speech in the past has contributed to conflict and violence.

The Holocaust, the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the 1995 Srebrenica genocide were characterized by dehumanization and derogatory language in speeches by political leaders, among others.

In Iraq, a campaign launched by Da'esh/ISIL against minority groups like the Yazidi, was accompanied by hate speech and does point to the likely commission of a genocide. In Myanmar, hate speech was used to describe Rohingya as sub-human to justify their killing.

What is the UN doing to fight hate speech?

The United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech represents the commitment of the UN to address and counter hate speech globally.

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English (/)

It includes 13 specific commitments for the UN to address and counter hate speech in a holistic way, including by:

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En Français (<https://fr.allafrica.com/>)

- tackling the root causes - which may include intolerance and hatred along identity lines.
- keeping hate speech from escalating, online and offline, into incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence; protecting the victims.
- and enhancing partnership with relevant actors.

All this is in line with international human right standards and with freedom of opinion and expression.

As Focal Point for the implementation of the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, my Office provides support to UN entities and Member States to develop context-specific strategies to tackle hate speech.

The UN strategy addresses these conditions of hate speech through a situation analysis of among others, political and social developments, and outlines relevant legal frameworks.

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, therefore, provides a kind of blueprint for action to contain and address hate speech in line with international human rights standards grounded on four key principles:

1. The strategy and its implementation to be in line with the right to freedom of opinion and expression.
2. Tackling hate speech is the responsibility of all - governments, societies, the private sector, starting with individual women and men. All are responsible, all must act.
3. In the digital age, the UN should support a new generation of digital citizens, empowered to recognize, reject and stand up to hate speech.
4. We need to know more to act effectively - this calls for coordinated data collection and research, including on the root causes, drivers and conditions conducive to hate speech.

How would these work in Africa?

One of the most important commitments in the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech is enhancing partnerships with the external actors, including other Member States, stressing the need for the UN to act together with other stakeholders to curb this phenomenon.

While it is the State that has the primarily responsibility to protect populations from hate speech, civil society also plays a very important role.

The role of civil society in preventing atrocity crimes is emphasized in the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech which stresses the contribution of all actors in society, in particular local actors, in addressing and countering hate speech that, in some circumstances, may be a precursor and trigger of atrocities.

Tackling hate speech is the responsibility of all - governments, societies, the private sector, starting with individual women and men. All are responsible, all must act

Regrettably, we continue to witness increasing trends of hate speech globally, resulting in growing trends of racism, xenophobia as well as hatred, discrimination, and attacks along identity lines.

Civil society also has the capability to influence large groups of populations when they use their voice to promote non-discrimination, respect for diversity and the importance of inclusive and peaceful societies. They can therefore be role models and positive influencers, contributing to prevention and peacebuilding efforts on the ground.

In Africa and elsewhere , disputed elections may trigger fully-fledged conflict. In some cases, hotly contested elections are fueled by hate-speech, either in campaign rallies or on social media platforms. What's your take on this?

Often, when there is an election, there is trepidation. People worry that there will be electoral violence, especially in countries where there was such violence in the past.

There are some positives though as at the same time, violent elections have produced professional peace builders who work round the clock to make sure that they do as much as possible to prevent electoral violence.



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Elections should not be a matter of life and death.

My advice is that there should be accountability. The rule of law must prevail, so that people know that they will be held accountable if there is violence.

There is a Somali proverb that says that if you've been burnt by hot milk, you will fear anything white and hot. Some countries have been to the edge of the precipice because of electoral violence. They know it's unnecessary for violence to happen because of an election. Many have taken preventive measures.

No society is immune from genocide, and so we need to be very careful, especially about hate speech, or ethnic, racial and religious profiling. And of course, I would say this for all contexts in the world, not just Africa - and not just during elections.

What about the leaders?

Sometimes leaders engage each other intensely, especially during elections - fighting with words, mobilizing their supporters to profile their opponents ethnically and religiously. This can be very divisive. No wonder then that after the elections, these same leaders struggle to find a way to make peace with each other.

The solution lies with the leaders. During intense times, leaders should find ways of disagreeing more responsibly. This is because ultimately, the leaders know that it is possible for them to develop their relationship after the elections and to be friends again with leaders who were their opponents, but it is very difficult for their supporters to develop this kind of relationship after the elections.

So, leaders should guide their supporters, who maintain enmity with the "other" to the right path.

What is your final message to young people in Africa and especially because they are the ones that are used sometimes to commit atrocities?

For the youth, I would say, first, it is essential to avoid the attribution of collective guilt. Crimes are committed by individuals, and not by societies and communities. When I say collective guilt, I mean we must not label ethnic communities as guilty of the crimes of an individual.

We need to pinpoint the individuals who commit these crimes. Criminal accountability and court adjudication of criminal allegations is important because they require that individuals be brought to trial for what they do. We must encourage that all possible steps in this direction should be taken.

The other thing that I would like to ask the youth is to make meaningful moves to help build bridges, especially across ethnic, racial and religious lines.

The youth should embrace, not fear difference between people.

Read the **original article** (<https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/june-2022/all-out-fight-against-hate-speech>) on **Africa Renewal** (<http://www.un.org/africarenewal>).

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