

**Opening remarks by George Okoth-Obbo, Special Adviser to the Secretary General
on the Responsibility to Protect**

**APPAP / CSIS Training Course on Hate Speech, Disinformation, and Incitement to
Violence**

2 March 2023, Bandung, Indonesia

Thank you very much for this opportunity to make remarks at the start of this training course on Hate Speech. Most of what I would have wanted to speak to align very much with the questions that will be covered substantively over these two days. I will thus not go over them serially but will limit myself to some contextual themes.

First, allow me to reiterate my gratitude to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, the Asia Pacific Partnership for Atrocity Prevention, and the Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect for inviting me to the training and facilitating my participation as you have done.

Hate speech has been employed to fuel and propagate some the most unspeakable abominations that have scarred the history of humankind. The Holocaust. The genocide in Cambodia in which intellectuals, opponents and city dwellers were systematically demonized as the enemies of the people. The genocide in Rwanda against the Tutsi which rode on decades of collective ethnic calumny and dehumanization. The Srebrenica genocide in which systematic nationalist propaganda was deployed to traduce the Bosnian population. The campaign of hate and misinformation loaded with derogatory and dehumanizing language against the Rohingya Muslim minority which has left an enduring trail of death, destruction and the internal and external forced displacement of thousands and millions. And so many others.

Hate speech¹ not only persists today in multiple forms and settings, but it is also rising and spreading at an alarming rate as one of the acutest existential threats to political, social, and

¹ Which, for operational purposes in addressing the issue globally, the UN defines in its Hate Speech Strategy 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**, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”. Launched in June 2019 the Strategy and Plan of Action were developed by a working group composed of thirteen entities led by the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, the focal point for implementation of the strategy working with UN Country Teams, providing support to Member States, regional organizations, and civil society. The Strategy emphasizes a holistic approach to tackling hate speech looking at addressing root causes, drivers, and impact of hate speech.

lawful order and cohesion everywhere around the world and is raising yet again the specter of atrocity crimes for whose deterrence the concept of the Responsibility to Protect was elaborated. The world designated and for now three years has marked an International Day for Countering Hate Speech to keep the light and attention shining on this contagion and the threats it poses. The United Nations has established a Strategy and Plan of Action to marshal coordinated and systematic action to tackle the root causes and drivers of hate speech, keep it from escalating into something more dangerous, particularly incitement to discrimination and violence, and respond to its impact upon societies. This strategy is coordinated by, and forms one of the most important components of the work of the United Nations Office for the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect in which I am situated, and I will be happy during the course of the training to provide information and other details on it.

What I would like to say for now is that I am quite delighted that today's training has been organized to focus on this issue, unpack what it is; what it is not; its root causes both at large and, in particular, in the places in which it is regaining prominence; the risks and threats it poses; and what should be done at national, regional and global levels to combat, inhibit, punish and roll it back and promote the values of equality, pluralism, respect for diversity and peaceful coexistence.

Of the range of questions that are critical in these respects, I would like to highlight some particular ones. The first is the quite important concern about striking the right balance between actions to deter hate speech on one hand and, on the other hand, the protection of freedom of expression and opinion. It hardly needs to be said that the United Nations of course does not impugn these cardinal values, nor does it wish or work to see public interest debate or civic space stymied. The UN's concerns and actions are directed to the malicious instrumental and transactional appropriation of the evocativeness of identity to incite division, intolerance, and violence, undermine social unity and even pose the risk of or lead to atrocities². So, it is important that the course will dedicate attention to illuminating what precisely falls or does not fall within the province of hate speech, a question that is typically approached from the legal perspective. At the same time, I hope that the fact of legal non-characterization of a speech category or form as hateful would not be seen as thereby removing in absolute terms any concerns, particularly in those cases where a link to the risk or likelihood of atrocities would be present.

I am also pleased by and very much welcome the focus of the training on Government officials. Of course, tackling the scourge of hate speech is a whole-of-society enterprise that will involve the populace at large, dedicated civil society organizations, the media, academia, technological and business entrepreneurship, and other players. But Governments have a primary responsibility in this response across the board from analyzing and detecting hate speech risks, trends, or occurrences to isolating, preventing, and deterring them and dealing with their effects. I thus hope that the officials taking part in the training will take maximum

² Hate speech as an indicator and/or a trigger for atrocity crimes are well elaborated in the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes. See also the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes.

advantage of it. I encourage you to raise all questions and issues which for you would help you better understand your roles and accountabilities in respect of this issue and the best and most effective ways to deliver on them.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that even in those cases where efforts to prevent, stop and punish hate speech will have been successful, the contagion typically will leave a trail of victims, survivors, and other effects. Victim and survivor support and dealing with broader political and social effects of hate speech are thus particularly important and need to be given priority attention both in actual programmatic and operational action and of course also in learnings of the type taking place today. Thus, even if within the agenda of the event today this aspect may not be specifically provided for, I am hoping that as the training and discussions move along, all opportunities will be taken advantage of to illuminate and underline these aspects.

To close, let me assure you of the availability of our Office to work with and support Governments in moving forward the issues, steps and actions that will contribute productively to combating and inhibiting the risks and actual occurrences of the atrocities which the Responsibility to Protect was elaborated to prevent. Whether in the context of training or other forms of knowledge and capacity-building, the Office and myself personally are available to collaborate with and extend all pertinent support. Please feel free to reach out to us accordingly.

I look forward to your most robust participation in this training to draw out the greatest gain from it.

Thank you very much for listening to me.

George Okoth-Obbo, Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect