

## Summer School on Human Rights – Webinar 8

### Rights of Minorities during COVID 19 - Dr. Leon Saltiel, Representative at UN Geneva and UNESCO and Coordinator on Countering Antisemitism for the World Jewish Congress

During the current pandemic, the world has witnessed the spread of a virus other than COVID-19, namely the proliferation of hate speech, racism and bigotry, stereotyping of minorities, antisemitic conspiracy myths and misinformation, which have exacerbated divisions in society. The health emergency is quickly devolving into a human rights crisis. The global rise in antisemitic, xenophobic and extremist sentiments threatens the well-being and safety of us all.

The World Jewish Congress has been particularly alarmed by the revival of some of the oldest antisemitic stereotypes blaming the creation and propagation of the virus on the Jews or even accusing them of exploiting the disease for economic purposes. As eloquently stated by WJC President Ronald S. Lauder “blaming Jews for the coronavirus has become a guiding force for anti-Semites worldwide.”

Unfortunately, he continued, scapegoating Jews has been going on since time immemorial. As early as the 14th century, when the bubonic plague swept throughout Europe, Jews were blamed because our forefathers were rumored to have poisoned community wells.

In the words of UN Secretary General António Guterres, this unprecedented situation has unleashed a “tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering,” targeting minority groups.

Similarly, in a recent statement, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, noted that he was “extremely concerned to see that certain religious leaders and politicians continue to exploit the challenging times during this pandemic to spread hatred against Jews and other minorities.” We fail, once again, to understand how centuries later we are still facing the same vitriol.

According to recent studies, conspiracy myths blaming specific communities for creating and propagating the coronavirus, and particularly Asians and Jews, have led to a rise in anti-Chinese and anti-Jewish sentiments on social media platforms. Too often, this hateful rhetoric incites violence, creating a real and present danger for the groups so maligned.

Some of the antisemitic allegations during this crisis include:

- Jews created the Corona virus
- The coronavirus is a part of a Zionist orchestrated plan for world domination; for economic domination; for subjugation of the religions; for the destruction of nations and the European Union
- Its aims are to profit Israeli pharmaceutical companies
- The Corona virus is spreading because of ‘dirty Jews’
- It signals the implementation of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion

These phenomena reveal great flaws and deficiencies in education systems around the world. Young people lack critical thinking, digital literacy, democratic citizenship education and basic empathy towards the other. We urge all governments to place an increased focus on critical thinking and media literacy in schools.

As the usage of the internet continues to expand with billions having access to the World Wide Web, the online sphere has become a fertile ground for the dissemination of antisemitic and other hateful messages, inspired by populist, xenophobic and intolerant ideologies. Social media networks, with billions of active monthly users, have become the largest supplier of hate speech, becoming the go-to platform for expressions of bigotry against minority groups. The perceived anonymity of this medium lowers inhibitions and fosters an environment in which racist and discriminatory language can flourish.

In addition, the online space allows for a rapid dissemination of this harmful content, moving it from the fringes to the mainstream, leading to the gradual social acceptance of such material. This is a grave cause for concern, even more so as this social acceptance is not only confined to the online sphere, but often translates to the world at large, inciting and motivating perpetrators to act, such as carrying out antisemitic and racist attacks against individuals and houses of worship, sometimes with murderous consequences. So online has consequences offline

We are working with the United Nations, UNESCO, the UN Human Rights Council to address the proliferation of hate brought on by this health crisis. We also cooperate with them on information and awareness-raising campaigns. We also exchange views with social media companies so we can compile guidelines, develop responses and build ways to monitor and remove dangerous content. Lastly, we urge governments to implement strict laws against online hate speech, similar to the legislation that was enacted recently in France and Germany.

It is high time that governments around the world prioritize the fight against hatred, by putting through the necessary legislation, monitoring and reporting the phenomenon, condemning all such manifestations and equipping their youngest citizens with the tools to be able to confront and oppose these messages of hatred and division.