

Keynote Speech
to the Asia-Pacific Regional Forum on Hate Speech, Social Media and Minorities

Online Event- 19-20 October 2020

Excellency Mr. Fernand de Varennnes, UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues,
Excellency Ms. Anna-Maria Biro, Director of the Tom Lantos Institute,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to thank the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues and the Tom Lantos Institute for the kind invitation extended to the OIC to take part in this august gathering.

This Forum provides us with the opportunity to develop a set of regional guidelines and concrete recommendations centering on the issue of hate speech in social media against minorities and to reflect on our collective efforts to counter online hate speech.

In fact, hate speech and Islamophobia incidents are on the rise in many parts of the world. The OIC is gravely concerned about this alarming and escalating trend, mainly since religious intolerance and hateful messages mostly target minorities. Minorities are sometimes portrayed by extremist groups as a threat to national unity, societal harmony, national security and public order, rather than being regarded as key and positive contributors to the cultural richness and ethnic and religious diversity of their own societies and/or host countries, living in peace and harmony along with the majority.

We are all concerned that these discriminatory practices serve not only to vilify, stigmatize and dehumanize minorities, but also as an excuse to trigger conflict, violence and terrorist attacks against minorities. Such recent attacks occurred in Myanmar, New Zealand and Sri Lanka, as well as in other places. Emergence of right-wing extremist and populist parties looking for immediate political gains is jeopardizing as well, the peaceful coexistence among different communities.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In our digital age, we are witnessing a surge of hate speech that has led to more tensions, violence and conflict in different societies. The social media, instead of serving as a digital platform to promote dialogue, tolerance and peaceful co-existence among the majority and minority communities, is used as a tool to spread hate and religious intolerance and to create an environment of insecurity, fear and distrust of unprecedented proportions.

In Myanmar, there is strong and documented evidence of the role of the military and Buddhist extremists in using and manipulating social media to demonize the Rohingya Muslim minority before, during and after their campaign of ethnic cleansing in August 2017. Even the UN fact-finding mission found that social media and hate speech had played a decisive role in the violent and horrendous crackdown on the members of one of the most persecuted minorities in modern history.

It is worth emphasizing that the spread of Covid-19 Pandemic has added a new layer of concern and gravity to the plight of Muslim minorities in some parts of the world as it has contributed to a resurgence of the politically motivated and divisive agenda of the instigators and proponents of hate speech, intolerance and religious discrimination. Several incidents occurred in some countries portraying their own citizens from the Muslim community as spreaders of corona virus and as a genuine threat to the safety and well-being of their societies.

The governments of those countries have the entire responsibility to protect these vulnerable communities and ensure their security and safety in conformity with their international human rights obligations. They have also the obligation to hold to account the perpetrators and instigators of hate and disinformation and to drain the swamp of religious extremists and hardline politicians who promote the agenda of targeting and terrorizing minorities.

Unfortunately, this new surge of incitement to hatred against minorities has once again been ignited through social media platforms. Digital technologies and social media platforms have been exploited in promoting hate speech and thereby endangering the security and safety of minorities. In recent times, there have been numerous and flagrant instances of social media

platforms being used and misused to spread hatred, unfounded lies and stigmatizing rumors, prompting a climate of insecurity, tension and hostility, and in some cases, leading to violent clampdown and flagrant crimes against minorities.

Social media platform owners have an obligation to filter and counter the unregulated online hate speech, and should not give space to the instigators of hatred against minorities in the name of freedom of expression. In light of the dramatic facts on the ground, they should also take the responsibility for preventing, in technical and practical terms, the spread of misinformation aiming at vilifying and demonizing minorities.

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To counter and combat Islamophobia and hate speech, the OIC has embarked on a comprehensive strategy to address the issue including, inter alia:

- (1) Establishing an Islamophobia Observatory in the General Secretariat to monitor Islamophobic trends and incidents and producing regular reports on the issue;
- (2) Engaging various international partners to raise global awareness on the threat posed by this phenomenon to international peace and security and co-existence among countries and communities;
- (3) Promoting the true image of Islam as a religion of peace, moderation, tolerance and co-existence, including through the work of the OIC Voice of Wisdom Center;
- (4) Promoting inter-civilizational and inter-faith dialogue based on mutual respect and shared responsibility, including through engaging religious leaders;
- (5) Sensitizing the media against incitement to hatred targeting Muslim communities.

In the face of the current and future challenges, the OIC is of the view that we should redouble our efforts to eradicate the underlying causes of hate speech and religious intolerance targeting minorities.

In this respect, minorities should be embraced and protected in order to become agents of positive integration and cultural diversity working for the development and prosperity of their own countries.

We should consider effective measures to promote tolerance, mutual respect and understanding, particularly through education, media and civil society, to protect all individuals and communities against hate and violence based on religion and faith and to ensure the protection of places of worship.

We should also engage the managements of social media platforms in order to take institutional and technical measures to filter and ban any content that incites violence and hatred.

To conclude, this collective global action would indeed require the strong will and commitment of states, international organizations, civil society organizations, faith leaders, media and social media platform providers. Hate speech could also be stemmed through establishing confidence building mechanisms among peoples of all faiths and promoting culture of tolerance and respect for diversity.

I wish you very productive discussions during this regional Asia Pacific forum.

I thank you for your attention.