

Highlighting Role Models in the Global Campaign against Violent Extremism

On September 22, in the context of the 71st session of UNGA, a tribute was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the initiative of a coalition of academics, private sector, journalists, and civil society actors to highlight role models in the global campaign against violent extremism. The event was moderated by CNN journalist, Wolf Blitzer.

The event opened with a moving tribute to the life and legacy of Elie Wiesel, a "giant of peace", in the presence of Marion Wiesel, led by Ambassador Ronald Lauder.

Other speakers included Daniel Weiss, President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Herbie Hancock; MSNBC anchor Stephanie Ruhle; New York's cultural icon Emily Rafferty and Archbishop Timothy Dolan, as well as Yury Fedotov, Executive Director of UNODC.

A special moment recognizing interfaith leadership for peace and understanding occurred for Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of the Holy See, as represented by The Most Reverend Bernardito Auza, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN, Dr. Waleed El-Ansary, special envoy of Dr. Ali Goma'a, Grand Mufti Emeritus of Egypt, on his behalf; and Rabbi Arthur Schneier, President and Founder of the Appeal of Conscience.

Rabbi Schneier said "all are entitled to freedom -- we have to take a stand united against terror."

The Permanent Observer of the Holy See spoke of the importance of cooperation and dialogue between all women and men.

Dr Waleed El-Ansary underlined the importance of "dialogue to dispel mistrust based on misunderstanding."

Ms Nadia Murad, Goodwill Ambassador of UNODC for human trafficking, drew on her own tragic experience as a Yazidi survivor escaping from conflict and captivity in Iraq, making a poignant appeal for action "to give freedom to all women and children, to all oppressed, so we all stand together, for the sake of all humanity."

This was echoed by Ms Hasfat Mohammed, who shared her story and commitment as a teacher in Nigeria building the defence of children to counter Boko Haram's propaganda. "Fighting for peace must be a collective effort to fight for peace -- for motherhood, for children -- don't stop."

"This is a fight for human rights and dignity and the humanity we all share. To lead this fight, we need champions," said Irina Bokova. "We need women and men, who are fearless, who stand up, speak out, write, help others, who inspire others to act, in newspapers, schools, camps, boardrooms, civil society, and places of worship."

"These role models come from across the world, united by the vision they hold of humanity as one family, sharing rights and equal dignity," said Irina Bokova.

The Director-General spoke along Sara Bloomfield, Director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum; Ambassador Esther Coopersmith; Meera Gandhi, Founder and CEO, The Giving Back Foundation; Francine Lefrak, Harvard Women's Leadership Board; Deborah Lehr, Chair of the Antiquities Coalition; and Catherine Reynolds, Founder and CEO of Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation.

The event also highlighted the leadership of the following role models -- Abdihafid Yussef Abdi (Kenya); Nicholas Kristof (USA); Turki Al-Dakhil (Saudi Arabia); A team of students at the Rochester Institute of Technology; Serge and Beate Klarsfeld (France and Germany); Emanuel Jal (South Sudan); Li Yongjun (China).

"This fight must go to the roots," said Irina Bokova. "This is the message of the UNESCO Constitution. We face a new global battle for hearts and minds today, starting with young hearts and minds. We must promote skills for critical thinking, opportunities for civic engagement, competences for intercultural dialogue. We must teach human rights, tolerance and solidarity."