

**Gandhi Celebration
2nd of October 2022**

Your excellency, Ambassador Jha,
Dear Vice-mayors,
Courthouse representatives,
Representatives of the Antwerp Indian Association,
Distinguished guests from the Indian Community,
Dear friends,

To this day we were all eagerly **looking forward** to.

To **come together** again, to jointly **pay tribute** to Gandhi again.

For that is what Mahatma Gandhi stood for and still stands for:
to **connect**, to **unite**, to **reach out**.

It is sincerely heartening to **commemorate** Gandhi Jayanti together with our **Indian community**.

Every year, I feel delighted and honoured to say some words on **his extraordinary personality** who inspired with his **optimism, courage**, his **principles** and **practice**.

To immerse oneself into Gandhi's life and work is to enrich oneself.

Today, these feelings are **overshadowed** by a sense of **grief** and **disbelief**.

Irrefutably, present times are extremely **challenging** and **disruptive**.

Due to many crises: **covid**, the **war in Ukraine**, **inflation**, **rising energy prices**, **climate change** and its consecutive **weather extremes** and **natural disasters**...

We're living in a **shift of era**, a period of radical transition with a lot of **uncertainty**, **fear** and **anger**.

Moreover, challenges appear to be **faster**, more **diverse** and **radical** than ever.

It is remarkably striking that on just **about any current topic**, **Ghandi's relevance** is evident.

Whether it is about **sustainability**, **natural disasters**, **global warming** or **climate action**, Gandhi still inspires as an **eternal visionary**, his life remains an **everlasting message**.

What is more, the **Ukrainian tragedy** sharply reminds us all about the necessity of returning to **Gandhi's wisdom** of **nonviolence**, defined by him as the greatest force at the disposal of mankind.

In times of war, **indifference** towards an invader is **no option**, nor is **opportunistic deafening silence**.

Today, on this **International Day of Nonviolence**, it touches even more to witness the **harsh** and **inhuman consequences** of the conflict in Ukraine, of violent **conflicts worldwide** and their devastating impact on so many lives.

Such as the impact on **talented youngsters**, whose future dreams are being shattered now that they have to fight for their freedom and homeland.

Now that they risk losing family and friends.

Such as the impact on all those who have no choice but to be on the run.

Mothers, children and elderly who are forced to seek **safe** but **unfamiliar shelter**, separated from those dear to them. Can you, can we even imagine or understand how vulnerable, insecure and desperate they must feel?

In addition, I value all those who are **helping to accommodate** them, at the best of their ability.

To our **municipalities**, to all our **organisations** and to **families** who are sacrificing a part of themselves to provide those refugees a secure place: my sincere **thanks** and **appreciation** for that.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To say it with Gandhi's words:

"The world will live in peace , only when the individuals composing it make up their minds to do so".

These words resonate in the **founding idea** of **UNESCO** and in its **preamble** to its **Constitution**:

“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”

Key to Gandhi’s philosophy is that **training in nonviolence** is essential in a culture of peace.

Nonviolence cannot be taken for granted, it is not a passive virtue or principle.

It is an **active one**, it has to be **trained** and **educated**, as described and lived by inspiring persons like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela.

As they learned and taught, **active nonviolence** requires great **courage** and **strength**.

So yes, it is our common duty to **invest** in it, to **propagate** and to **proclaim** it, to keep **striving for peace**, for **human dignity** and **equality** as our moral and shared foundation.

In the late 30’s, on the verge of World War 2, Gandhi wrote **2 letters addressed to Hitler**.

Regrettably, both letters were intercepted by the British authorities and they never reached Hitler.

But both their **content** could hardly be more **contemporary**.

“We have found in non-violence a force which, if organised, can without doubt match itself against a combination of all the most violent forces in the world.”

And further: “If you attain success in the war, it will not prove that you were in the right. It will only prove that your power of destruction was greater.”

In a world with **armed conflicts, rising global tensions** and **intolerance**, the peaceful, universal and inspiring **message** of Mahatma Gandhi is **needed** more than ever.

Could Gandhi’s **words** and **principles** about nonviolence, of peaceful conflict resolution **be any more topical?**

More urgent? More compelling?

As said by former **UNESCO’s Director-General** Irina **Bokova**:

“Peace is more than the absence of war, it is living together with our differences – of sex, race, language, religion or culture – while furthering universal respect for justice and human rights on which such coexistence depends.”

Let us all continue to **work hard on that**. Let us all **contribute** to a **safe, respectful, inclusive** and **tolerant society**. In **Antwerp**, in the rest of the **world**.

Thank you.