

Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the Nuremberg Forum 2018 marking the 20th anniversary of the Rome Statute

19.10.2018 - Speech 

On my way here today, I had an image in my mind that is probably familiar to almost all of us from our history books – a black-and-white photo from 1946 that shows this room, Courtroom 600 of the Nuremberg Palace of Justice.

Over there, in the dock, sat the leading figures of the Nazi regime, their lawyers in front of them. Opposite them sat the judges and prosecutors of the Allies. The press, spectators and police were also in attendance.

It was almost like a normal criminal trial. And yet the photo of this scene is indelibly etched into our minds.

The more I thought about it, the clearer it seemed to me that the remarkable, historic thing about it was precisely this sense of normality.

It was here that men sat in court, men who were responsible for the most heinous crimes in history and had acted against all principles of human civilisation.

And yet their judges were not out to get revenge, but granted the defendants a fair trial, thus confronting them with the very same principles of human civilisation that they had so infamously violated.

This triumph of civilisation over inhumanity is what characterises the Nuremberg Trials to this day and makes this place, Courtroom 600, so significant.

It was here that the foundations were laid not only for the efforts to come to terms with the National Socialist era in Germany. Nuremberg of all places, the city of the National Socialists' party congresses, became the birthplace of a new understanding of law and justice:

No one is above the law – not even the most powerful!

- Secondly, I feel optimistic because I see that determination is growing among those who defend the International Criminal Court against undue criticism and political pressure and stand up against the erosion of its authority.

In recent weeks, I have held talks with many of my counterparts on what we can do to prevent the disintegration of the international order. This gave rise to the idea of an alliance of multilateralists – an alliance of countries that pool their strengths in order to underpin and continue to develop the rules-based order. There is great interest in this idea, particularly as regards international criminal jurisdiction.

Just a few weeks ago, six North and South American countries joined forces and sent a referral regarding the preliminary examination of the situation in Venezuela launched by you, Ms Bensouda.

We expressly welcome this, also because this example shows that people believe in the International Criminal Court, and not only here in Nuremberg, but also in many parts of the world.

- My third and last point concerns the crucial issue of accountability. We also feel pain and rage when the worst war crimes and crimes against humanity go unpunished. I'm thinking of the terrible poison gas attacks in Syria, for example. However, looking beyond this conflict, which receives extensive media coverage, terrible crimes are committed time and again in many other places.

But we're not simply standing by and letting this happen. Along with our partners, we have drawn up new ways to secure evidence. In Syria, for instance, we are ensuring that evidence is not irretrievably lost.

Our message to perpetrators and victims is that justice will prevail.

We will also be guided by this maxim as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. We want to ensure that perpetrators are consistently held to account.

In view of the fronts in the Security Council, this will be no easy task. However, the fight for justice requires courage and stamina, particularly from Germany, as this fight always means striving for human dignity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This battle could not be won without the creativity and courage of civil society, without people who often take great risks in the struggle for human rights, without partners like all of you here in this room. I am very grateful indeed to you for this partnership and for your support and stamina.

In particular, I would like to thank our host, the International Nuremberg Principles Academy, whose goal is expressed in its name – namely to implement the principles that guided Robert H. Jackson and the authors of the Rome Statute in the city where the history of international criminal law began.