

# Understanding Genocide Prevention

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Excellences, colleagues, friends:

Today we gather one another, in the shadow of a century that gave us a name and the terrible awareness of what we do to one another when – having lost the usual constraints of norms and shared values– we venture into annihilating people as such. The century that gave us the word “genocide” offered too many examples of it. From Armenia to Rwanda, from the Holocaust to Argentina we have been witnessing the systematic violence that is unleashed when large numbers of humans are targeted for killing. Genocide happens. Each time is one too many. Yet genocide is not an accident. It is not a fate. It is not the result of forces that we cannot understand and tame, deconstruct and win.

Genocide happens because someone is motivated to do it, acquires the capacity to execute it and finds conducive environments where no one is ready to stop it. It is a pattern similar to other human-made calamities: car accidents, explosions, and urban fires. None of this happens ‘just because.’ As human family we have been paying attention to controlling fire, and accidents and risks. We can and should do so for genocide as well. It is an enormous task. It is a collective task. It is a future-oriented task that requires us to be critical, though and almost cynical but also (at the same time) hopeful, clear-minded and dedicated.

We are aware that the work that we will do today is part of a larger effort that started in the midst of World War II. It is an effort that countered the industrialization of violence experienced in the World War I with the ingenuity of legal creativity. Crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the legal norms that attempted to bring a modicum of understanding into the madness of war must be connected with the efforts to prevent genocide, noting that genocide is always announced, always made public, always executed in actual communities. The mothers know of their sons and daughters disappearing. The children know of their parents’ death. The friends witness the violence that marks human lives inexorably. The work that we will do together in these two days will focus in particular on hate speech, the responses to it and the promise for prevention. It is an important step in a multilayered process that has UN member states at its center.

Prevention is a product of many actors: it is the result of sustain political effort, it is at the core of the evolution of the state. States are learning when they move toward the prevention of genocide. States can learn from their past and make prevention of genocide and mass atrocity crimes an intentional, systematized collective response, an horizon that allows others (communities, other UN member states, regional bodies and international organizations) to cooperate effectively.

Yet the desire of preventing genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and all forms of discrimination (to use the formulation of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) can be paradoxical. Because the intentions are already good there is a temptation to be sloppy on language, careless on methods, cheap on resources and magical in aspirations. To be credible prevention must be stable, systematized, and sustained. Genocide is not done in a day. Prevention cannot be done the day after. Genocide is not an individual choice. Prevention cannot be an individual affair only. Genocide requires energy and resources. Prevention must be done with adequate energy and resources. It is not the business for others.

So let’s identify four levels of action at a time in which we are recognizing the progress made in the last 10 years. At the Stockholm Conference on genocide prevention Mr. Kofi Annan announced the establishment of the Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide position. Today we must orient ourselves towards progress that must be made at the level of local communities, UN member states, regional bodies and international organizations. These four levels must work creatively and cooperatively. We must continue building the system of genocide prevention that can sustain our collective desire to thwart, stop and tame the effort to kill peoples ‘as such,’ collectivities for what they are, and groups for what they signify.

Who is in charge among these four levels? Who is really going to do prevention? Who is going to prevent the next one? As in public health it is a shared responsibility. We can prevent only what we know and yet what we know is not enough to prevent. We know that genocide is the product of exclusionary violence. We know that perpetrators always try first before the full-scale execution. We know that impunity is a potent incentive to continue genociding. We know that we must take human rights violations very seriously and that each community, each UN member state must take its own history very seriously. Recurrence is the most potent indicator of risk. Political formations cannot escape their responsibility. It is when a state is used for mass atrocity crimes that destruction becomes so tragic.

We are now in a phase in which UN member states have been rethinking their own role in genocide prevention not only for the legal judgment against Serbia and its responsibility to due diligence in preventing violence but out of the concern for their own populations and the for the world at large. Indeed UN member states have never been so keen in responding to the responsibility of prevention. The recent GAAMAC meeting in Costa Rica is an effective indication of a trend. Whiting this trend there is the awareness that it is impossible to legitimately work on preventing the genocide elsewhere if there is no serious internal debate, a committed learning from its own history.

A functioning UN member state can thwart the plans of the *genocidairs*, can respond properly, can prevent genocide from happening. Resilient communities can play their role in making sure that the violent ones are unable to kill *en masse*. Regional bodies can monitor and share knowledge, offer refuge and intervene. International organizations can be the reference point for coordinated action, for learning that is not transient. Indeed the International organizations can be the reference point for norm setting that can sustain prevention over time. Yet, when this doesn't happen all can learn from failures.

If we were in another world; if we were in another time, we could have blame the gods, destiny or fate but we live in a time of rationality where we own it to our intelligence and dignity to try to understand. One element that we know better now is that those who are able to utter aloud hateful words are also able to conceive acting on them. Not that each word is going to turn into genocide but hateful expression are symptoms that must be taken very seriously.

We want to give each other the space to reflect and learn, the occasion to stay and listen, the opportunity to humbly acknowledge what we know and what we need to know so that the suffering of too many will be honored by the learning of new generations. One of the best way to honor the victims is to let their suffering teach those who remain behind something that will make us all better.

Understanding is a moral and a political choice. We can refrain from it. We can refuse it. We can say that there is no need to learn or that learning is impossible because violence has been with us since the moment Cain killed his brother Abel. But we can indeed be attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible and seek what is true, beautiful and good. How can we do this in the middle of madness? How can we do this in the middle of violence? How can we do this in the middle of chaos? It can be done recognizing that this has been done. Over and over again we encountered those courageous enough to stand out of the crowd and rescue others. Saving lives in the midst of genocide has been observed many times over and gives us hope. Yes, in the middle of violent chaos someone chose differently. That choice saved one life or two, or hundreds or thousands: in many ways saved us all from the torpor of inaction, from the timidity of cowards, from the false traps of impossibility. If rescuers rescued anyone we –especially those living in safe and stable conditions, with water and good food, internet and good access to knowledge and others– have the responsibility to understand, to understand well, to understand better. Prevention is cumulative.

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide (1994–2014), this International Conference builds on the work done by the 1948 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and the 2005 World Forum, which decided on the principles of the Responsibility to Protect. The goal of the conference is ambitious: creating an opening for the development of political tools to address prevention further.

This first session of the Conference focuses on the Status of Academic Research on Genocide. International scholars and academics in the fields of political science, history, social psychology will elaborate on their research, their findings, and share the trajectory of their work. They

will offer insights in patterns of genocides and in the role national, regional and global actors have played or failed to play. Genocide prevention is indeed a collective action that brings together knowledge and political will.

It does so making clear that genocide prevention is the product of a moral and political choice of understanding, of a commitment to understand what for many is futile or impossible. This commitment to understand, recognize and learn is the gift of the Holocaust as the very name 'genocide' was forged in the midst of that crucible and is a gift of many pioneers who tried to learn from the suffering of many. What we all learn is that multitudes are made by persons, individual persons, killed one by one, lost by their families and communities one by one. This is why we can claim that the horror of the industrialized wars, the first of which started 100 years ago with the invasion of Belgium, gave us the conditions from which we could learn to express suffering in terms of human right violations.

When we approach genocide prevention we cannot but use the human rights framework. We are one humanity. Our human condition is shared with those who live, those who lived and those who will live after us. There is no escape from this embrace. This horizon can be as violent and destructive as killer killing a person but it can also be as life giving and hopeful as the way out of the rescuers that let other live at the risk of their own lives. So we position the understanding of genocide prevention as a collective project that started in the midst of World War II and continue to today through the human rights commitments.

However, there is a dimension that the human rights community had difficulty addressing and this has to do with our interactive, relational structure. We as humans are never born in a void. We have mothers and fathers, families and people. We receive languages and signs, wisdom and roles that make us human. We are human when we re born and we become human every day through the help, the support, the invitation of others. What we are discovering now is that we need all others to be as human as we can be. If we start discriminating –“I do not need this... I do not recognize that ...”- we are depriving not only others of their rights but ourselves of our own humanity. This is too much of treasure to be given away in the name of safety and security, in the name of religion or law, in the name of customs or convenience. We learn – unfortunately painfully through the sorrow of too many – that we cannot and should not discriminate. The moment we start discriminating against the moment we start the path to mass atrocity crimes. It will be a decline, imperceptible to many, but visible to all later when the tragedy will emerge. Humans can refuse to understand. Humans are free and their freedom must be exercised to be fulfilled. It is in the hospitality of the others that we become the humans that we can be.

So genocide prevention takes into focus entire populations and not only individuals. It looks at groups and not only persons. It does so in a legal way through the language of the convention

- singling out national, ethnical, racial or religious groups
- identifying intent as a key determinant
- specifying that the act is made to destroy in whole or in part the group as such

Rights of minorities, cultural rights, social and economic rights have moved our collective consciousness towards the realization that we can't simply protect individuals. We must also grant human communities the protection of political structures that will not oppress, destroy and force them into suffering and oblivion. No state in the world can claim today 100% ethnic purity, a perfect alignment of nation and state, language and people, culture and norms. Each Member State of the United Nations today has a varying degree of diversity within. All states are also facing new human groups that are not national, ethnical, racial or religious. Political groups or advocacy groups, gender-based groups and affinity groups are experiencing degrees of challenges and protection. When we consider the ever changing fluctuation of human relationality we immediately grasp the paradoxical challenge of genocide prevention: on one hand recognizing a groups, any group, is the proper way to make room for the creativity and liveliness of human experience; on the other hand is the potential first act of stigmatization, separation and suffering. As a human rights doctor said recently: “The moment you start a list you have to be conscious of who is getting it.”

Should we abolish listings? Keeping any record of any kind? Avoid recognizing people? Off course not but the question for us becomes: what kind of processes we can put in place to minimize the chances of this information to be used for destruction, oppression and genocide and

what are the ways in which we can maximize the chances that this information will be used to accompany each human person on the way to fulfilled and fulfilling lives?

Genocide prevention is at the core of any contemporary statecraft project. States have contributed enormously to human suffering. Political representation –even in very advanced democracies– has been often a form of political determination. In many states national, ethnical, racial or religious groups were not represented equally, properly, safely. The same is true for many other human groups. States discovered that inadequacy in different ways and at different times. For some it was a violent episode that prompted the learning. In other cases just the growing of indigenous groups previously under-represented.

Today all states face the challenge of representing diversity politically. I find that it is fitting for us to have this conference in Brussels where even the way we spell the city name has meaning and each street has two names. Some countries have gone in the direction of conformity. Others are experimenting with plurality. Why is this important to understand genocide prevention? Because genocide will never happen if the state is functioning and against it. Genocidaires have a chance when the state doesn't work or doesn't want to work; when the structures in place to protect all citizens are suddenly used to destroy some; when the very institutions are controlled by those who want to transform the state itself in a killing machine. Careful, consistent, and transparent compliance with human rights norms and procedures assures that no state is left behind in the effort to offer to all individuals and groups the protections of the law, the care of the others, the recognition of the whole.

At this Brussels Conference, scholars and practitioners will attempt to improve the national legal frameworks and call for urgent action in the area of hate speech but also increase international cooperation in order to develop tools for the prevention of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Killers cooperate to kill many. Cooperation is needed to prevent that from happening. It must be an intentional, permanent, and consistent cooperation of states: the same way states cooperate on health or environment protection, energy and travel. We made great strides in the last 10 years with the establishment of networks of focal points in the UN Member States. We are indeed developing systems of prevention and punishment of the crimes in close collaboration with the UN Secretary General's office, and especially with the Special Advisors on Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect.

During the last 10 years we have heard voices coming from the communities that have been affected the most by human violence. We have heard the voice of those who have said 'never again' in a different tone, with a different voice, with a different urgency. These are living in Argentina, in Rwanda, in Guatemala, in Bangladesh. These are voices of those for whom the past of violence is the present of suffering; the voice of those who having lost someone are still searching for the words to speak about it. Communities all around the world regrouped after the violence was unleashed against them and sorrowfully started to share, to speak, and to remember. That remembrance is precious. It is the beginning of a new hope for them and for us together, for a small village affected by the violence and for the states that are open to learn.

The cycle of recurrence can be stopped. The cycle of violence is interrupted when the victims are allowed to say the truth, to share the truth, to invite into the truth of the suffering with those who are ready to listen and share. Many are afraid. Many would prefer their comfort and denial. But some have let those voices speak and that listening changed countries like Argentina forever. They also change the logic of statecraft: we can learn from our painful past. Learning from our mistakes is the way forward towards more just and inclusive societies, more respectful and stable states. Security will not come in the form of the praetorian state. It will have the face of a recognized victim and is inviting all to move forward, not to forget but to learn and to commit for the future.

The future is now if we can allow the sorrowful past to speak, to wake us up from the illusions of our comfort. The future has the gentle, fragile and yet very strong touch of a life that went through a lot and still wants to speak and learn. In this context understanding genocide prevention is indeed a commitment, a contribution to our shared humanity, free from its own violence.