

MASS ATROCITY PREVENTION

Renowned lawyer and human rights activist **Baroness Helena Kennedy** calls for the UK government to use the ‘loudest and clearest voice’ on the global stage to prevent mass atrocity violence.

Instances of mass atrocity violence – war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and ethnic cleansing – are not just rising but are spiralling around the world.

As director of the International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute, I have spent time with, and campaigned alongside, survivors of atrocity violence, from Yazidi women in Syria and the Uyghur communities in exile from Xinjiang to the women and human rights defenders of Afghanistan and many others. Their stories are a glaring testament to the collective failure to stand resolute in the face of atrocity crimes and hold accountable those who continue to perpetrate this kind of identity-based violence.

Of today’s major and emerging foreign policy crises, the vast majority – from Ukraine, Sudan, Syria, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories to Ethiopia, Myanmar and Xinjiang – are driven by violent targeting of civilian groups based on their identities. If left unchecked, the global propellants of prejudice and inequality, climate collapse, the retreat from liberal democracy, and the great changes in technology, as we see in social media and so on, mean that identity-based mass atrocity crimes will multiply over the next decade. Of that I am sure. We are already seeing it happening.

At the same time, growing disregard for international law, for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and our collective responsibilities to prevent mass atrocity and protect populations has ushered in an age of impunity. We have failed, time and again, in the face of these grave crimes, and as a consequence our world – indeed, our nation – is less safe and becoming less so. Impunity begets impunity.

Regrettably, these crimes have deep consequences. Perpetrators commit genocide and crimes against humanity because they work, at least in the short term; they fulfil the dreadful political objectives of their architects. It is not a nice fact, but it is a true one. It is past time that we, and our government, accept it. For too long, the reluctance to do so has created a strategic and moral deficit in government policy.

It is also commonly said that armed conflicts are a precursor to the commission of mass atrocity crimes, but in fact it is not always that way round. Indeed, during the many human rights crises of the modern age, mass atrocities often came first and caused armed conflict to break out. For example, mass atrocities drove armed conflict in Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s and failures to adequately respond to mass atrocities against the Rohingya in Myanmar in 2017 emboldened the Tatmadaw, contributing to their seizure of power in February 2021 and the ensuing civil war.

As parliamentarians, we have stood in outrage, time and again but it is not sufficient. Outrage does not help to protect innocent civilians from deliberate or indiscriminate attack, arbitrary detention, summary execution, sexual violence and torture, or forced starvation. You need not look any further than the ongoing conflict in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including the horrific attacks on 7 October and the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

And while it is welcome that the government in 2021 identified mass atrocity prevention as a new foreign policy priority, more action is needed to achieve real change.

Firstly, to ensure the UK properly prioritises atrocity prevention, it is vital a statutory mandate – which is bolstered by political leadership and strategic vision – is introduced. This mandate should elevate and leverage the important work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s mass atrocity prevention hub; while also requiring the monitoring of the steps that take people, and governments, on a trajectory towards genocide.

Secondly, more needs to be done to enshrine the need for senior political leadership and ownership of the UK’s moral and legal obligations to prevent and protect. By introducing measures such as the statutory duty, the UK would be able to re-energise commitments to international humanitarian law and rehabilitate our country’s battered reputation on the global stage, which has happened as a result of our pulling away from our international obligations.

Thirdly, measures must be introduced to support and train embassies and country teams on the dynamics and warning signs of modern atrocities, and the trajectory towards genocide in some cases. The UK government has already committed to doing this, but is yet to deliver on it. UK country teams in fragile or violent states have to be properly resourced to embed atrocity prevention thinking and strategy within their policy and programming.

Finally, to drive this work forwards, it is crucial there is a ring-fenced budget that guarantees consistent resourcing for mass atrocity early-warning systems, strategic policy-making and effective implementation.

It is evident that any meaningful development of a strategic approach to preventing and responding to mass atrocities must bring together senior representatives of government departments – No. 10 itself, the intelligence agencies and multilateral representatives, from the UN to NATO. Atrocity prevention has been a core national security interest for the United States since 2011, supported by a clear atrocity prevention strategy launched in 2022. I knew and was a huge admirer of Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, who was very much at the heart of persuading the American State Department to take these steps and to create a hub that was about genocide prevention and atrocity crime prevention.

I want to see this country become the nation that has the loudest and clearest voice when it comes to the rule of law and respect for human rights. There is clearly much to do to achieve that, and I hope the next UK government will strengthen and build on the work already being done in this area. We are at a critical point, and it is vital the UK plays a leading role when it comes to the prevention of mass atrocities across the world.

This essay is part of a collection of thought pieces curated by Amnesty International UK and Labour Campaign for Human Rights. June 2024

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