

UNITED NATIONS



PRESS STATEMENT

Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

Friday, 24th February 2023, Abuja, Nigeria.

Distinguished members of the press, Media representatives,

I thank you all for coming here today.

Tomorrow, Nigerians will be casting their vote, celebrating a democratic process that has seen, since 1999, election results respected, demonstrating Nigerians' commitment to democratic values.

Since I arrived in Nigeria, I have met government officials, the National Peace Committee, political, religious, and traditional leaders, women's groups, youth, representatives of the civil society, the diplomatic community, members of election observation missions, and presidential candidates.

I wish to begin by acknowledging with respect the work done by all national authorities, and notably the Independent National Electoral Commission towards holding free, fair, and transparent elections, including by using innovation and technology.

I welcome the signing of the Peace Accord on Wednesday, 22 February 2023 as a commitment to national unity and peaceful elections.

My job is to prevent genocide and related crimes. More specifically, I am charged with raising alarm through early warnings to the Secretary General and the Security Council when there is a risk of genocide and related crimes and mobilizing action to prevent or stop that risk.

My office also leads the implementation of the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, launched by the Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in 2019. This strategy sets out guidance for United Nations entities and other societal actors to address hate speech at the national and global level, enhance efforts to tackle the root causes and drivers of hate speech, including racism and racial discrimination. The strategy is in line with international human rights standards, and with the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

We use *the United Nations Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes* to assess the risk of genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity. *The framework* sets out risk factors and indicators as pointers to early warnings.

Early warning signs and risk factors include dissemination of hate speech and absence of independent mechanisms to address it; politicization of identity; proliferation of local militias and other armed groups; particularly dehumanizing types of violence inflicted upon civilians based on their ethnicity, religion, race or nationality, intergroup tensions and attacks against civilian populations, long-standing structural discrimination, deep economic inequalities and social exclusion, and shrinking democratic and civic spaces among others. While elections are not a risk factor, they have in some instances provided excuses for exacerbating tensions that could lead to violence.

I should emphasize that my role as Under Secretary General and Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide is not to decide whether Genocide, has taken place. This is the responsibility of independent courts of justice that have the jurisdiction to make those judgements. Our focus is on prevention of genocide and related crimes, detecting risk factors with the objective of mitigating and deescalating them.

This mandate is global, meaning that my office looks at situations worldwide where there is a risk that genocide and related crimes could occur. No part of the world is immune to the risk of these crimes and indeed all societies have some indicators of risk. It is however often how societies respond to these risks that determines if a situation escalates into more serious concern.

The election season in Nigeria has witnessed a surge in the use of inflammatory language, hateful and divisive rhetoric. Such hate speech is amplified at an unprecedented rate by digital technology. Hate speech, especially if accompanied by policies and practices that discriminate against populations based on their identity often results in hate crimes, discrimination, and violence and can be both a precursor and a trigger of atrocity crimes, in particular genocide.

Countering and addressing hate speech is crucial. In the Holocaust, and the genocides in Rwanda against the Tutsi and in Srebrenica, Bosnia Herzegovina, hate speech and the dehumanization of 'the other' was present during, after and long before violence broke out and such crimes were committed. We know that the impact of hate speech makes those targeted more vulnerable to violence, exposes them to exclusion and discrimination, exacerbates underlying social and economic inequalities, and undermines social cohesion. We know too that hate speech particularly impacts on women differently as is often evidenced by their absence from political spaces. It also contributes to polarizing communities along identity lines, hampering dialogue and reconciliation. Discourse which dehumanizes groups is especially dangerous. Diaspora blogs and social media posts fuelling the normalization of violence are also of deep concern.

Action aimed at countering and addressing hate speech must be at the heart of all prevention efforts. Indeed, it all begins with words.

By addressing divisive and harmful language, we can avoid escalation of tensions that could result in violence. Measures to that effect can also help build societies that are resilient and inclusive. Actions to support victims are especially vital.

I also emphasize accountability for electoral related violence. Lack of accountability can be detrimental to making and sustaining peace. Peace and justice are not contradictions or mutually exclusive categories. **Accountability constitutes a key component of peace.**

Last year, my office convened traditional leaders from across the world here in Abuja to develop a Plan of Action for Atrocity Prevention. The drafting of this plan of action was led by traditional leaders from Nigeria. The plan includes enhancing the engagement of my office with traditional leaders, to support them as champions of prevention globally. It builds on work previously done by my office, bringing together religious leaders and actors to prevent atrocity crimes resulting in the Fez plan of action.

I firmly believe that working with Governments, the larger society, and especially women and youth, plays a significant catalytic role in preventing atrocity crimes at the root, by tackling risk factors and promoting sustainable peace and inclusive societies. In the long run prevention remains critical, placing special attention on structural drivers of conflict.

I urge tech and social media companies to utilize all tools available to stop the spread of hate speech that could constitute incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence on their platforms.

Let me emphasize the invaluable role of the media during electoral processes in educating, informing, raising awareness, and alerting on situations at risk, and countering narratives of hatred and segregation with verified facts.

I also welcome the work done by my UN colleagues in the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) led by Deputy SRSG Giovanni Biha and the UN Country Team in Nigeria led by Resident Coordinator Matthias Schmale in supporting Nigeria towards a peaceful election.

Finally, let me say that Nigeria is a country that was in the past, a home away from home for me. Before joining the United Nations, I was welcomed by Nigerians into their homes and by State Governors into their Offices, as I worked here for several years, mainly in remote areas, mediating conflict while linking local peacebuilding and conflict prevention initiatives to State and Federal policies.

I know that the potential for division and mistrust resides in all societies. But, so too, do the qualities of mutual respect, dignity, understanding, justice for all, and reconciliation that recognizes the suffering of all victims and **does not attribute collective guilt to entire ethnic or religious communities for the crimes of a few.**

Prevention of Genocide is a serious and challenging responsibility with success measured in preventing the suffering and deaths of human beings.

It is my sincere hope and prayer that all goes well tomorrow as Nigeria votes.

I thank you.

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