

## Op-Ed “70 years of the Genocide Convention – demonstrating our commitment to the promise of “never again””

This year we will commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the [Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide \(the Genocide Convention\)](#). The Genocide Convention was the first human rights treaty to be adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, on 9 December 1948, just three years after the birth of the United Nations. Its adoption was largely the result of the tireless efforts of one man, Raphael Lemkin who, after losing most of his family in the Holocaust, was determined to do what he could to make sure that this crime could never happen again. Some six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, one of the most devastating human tragedies of the twentieth century, as well as many others whom the Nazis considered “undesirable”. The Genocide Convention represents the United Nations commitment to the often quoted “never again”; a commitment to learn from and not repeat history.

Regrettably, this commitment has often failed to translate into action, even when it has been most needed. We saw this in 1994 in the abject failure of the international community to prevent the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda, which cost the lives of almost a million people in the space of 100 days. No more than a year later, we witnessed it again as the international community, including United Nations peacekeepers, looked away during the Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Important progress has been made since - and because of - these failures. In 1998, the International Criminal Court was established, a permanent court already foreseen by the Genocide Convention in 1948. In 2005, the Secretary-General established the post of Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, a position I currently hold, to ensure that there is a voice within the United Nations system that can alert the Secretary-General and, through him, the Security Council, to early warning signs of genocide and advocate for preventative action before genocide becomes a reality.

In addition, at the 2005 World Summit all United Nations Member States made a ground-breaking commitment to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (atrocities) and to take collective action when States manifestly fail to do so, in accordance with and using the tools provided by the United Nations Charter. This has become known as the principle of “the responsibility to protect”

Despite these achievements and the continued commitment to “never again”, we have not managed to eradicate genocide. International crimes, including genocide, are a terrible reality faced by populations across the globe. We know the warning signs and we know how to prevent these crimes, but we often fail to act in time, or to act at all. In the Central African Republic, Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria and in so many other places, people are being targeted because of their identity - because of the religion they practice, the culture in which they were raised or simply because of their distinctive physical characteristics. This is unacceptable.

We also fail to invest sufficiently in prevention, to build the resilience needed to address the risk factors for genocide, or to take timely and decisive action when we see the warning signs.

Our commitment to the Genocide Convention must be reinvigorated. The fact that we have not eradicated genocide is not because the Convention is flawed, but rather because its potential has not

been fully realised. And despite universal rejection of genocide, some Member States have still not taken the fundamental step of ratifying the Convention.

At the time of writing, 149 States have ratified the Genocide Convention. Surprisingly, 45 United Nations Member States have not yet done so. Of these 20 are in Africa, 18 in Asia and seven in Latin America.

Universal ratification of the Convention is fundamental to demonstrate that genocide has no place in our world. That no one should fear discrimination, persecution or violence simply because of who they are.

What message are the States who have not ratified the Convention sending, 70 years after its adoption? That genocide could never happen within their borders? Genocide can happen anywhere. History has shown us time and again that no region or country is immune. Yet many States seem reluctant to even consider this a possibility or to undertake a critical evaluation of their risks and vulnerabilities.

In December last year, I launched an appeal for universal ratification of the Genocide Convention, urging the 45 United Nations Member States that have not done so to take steps to ratify or accede to the Convention before its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 9 December 2018. The aim of this appeal is to refocus our attention on the Convention, underline its continued importance as the legal standard for ensuring the punishment of this crime, as well as its often-untapped potential as a tool for prevention.

The Genocide Convention, together with its sister treaties on human rights and the Rome statute for the International Criminal Court, remains the most important legal standard we have to fulfil the commitment to “never again” that the world made 70 years ago. For our own sakes, and for the sake of future generations [#Prevent Genocide #Ratify the Genocide Convention](#)

*To learn more about the Convention and how you can support the appeal click [here](#)*

*To learn more about the Special Adviser and the work of his office click [here](#)*