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United Nations marks 75 years of the Genocide Convention, making an urgent call to keep its promise as a living force in world society for all communities at risk today

New York, 8/9 December 2023 – United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has warned that “in today’s world of deep division, mistrust and conflict, we remain confronted by the enduring menace of this atrocious crime (*of genocide*); in danger of forgetting the dark lessons of the past”, in a message to mark the 75th anniversary of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and the International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime.

“This year’s theme reminds us that the Convention and its timeless message must remain a living force in our world, calling us to uphold its solemn promise. Keeping this promise requires all governments ratifying and fully implementing the Convention, while ensuring that perpetrators are held to account. It requires a renewed global push to establish and strengthen prevention mechanisms, educate new generations about past genocides, and counter mis- and disinformation, which can fuel hate speech and genocidal intent and action,” he said.

Mr. Guterres’ message was delivered by his Chef de Cabinet Mr. Earle Courtenay Rattray, at the solemn commemoration held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, which started with a minute of silence honoring victims of genocide across the world.

Organized by the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, the commemoration reflected on the legacy of the 1948 Genocide Convention and its main contributor, Raphael Lemkin, as well as on the impact of the Convention in the fields of accountability, prevention, and memory – while looking ahead at steps needed to strengthen its ratification and full implementation.

"No country or region is immune from the destructive forces of discrimination, prejudice, hate speech, and human rights violations. The warning signs are clear and recognizable, and we must always proactively heed those signs. The good news is that we know how to prevent these crimes and we can. The bad news is that too often we fail to act in time. We must accept that the imperative to prevent genocide is both a legal and a moral obligation", the President of the General Assembly, H.E. Dennis Francis, said in his address, underlining that we must understand the root causes of this crime and honor the collective duty as a community of nations to protect vulnerable populations.

The Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, underlined the many important achievements from the Genocide Convention, 75 years after its adoption: “The Convention went beyond just criminalizing genocide. It also put in place a legal obligation on States to prevent this crime. It has played a key role in informing and shaping the international criminal law framework and system we have in place today.” However, she added, “in all regions of the world, old conflicts resume, new generations take up the fight, and innocent civilians bear the burden of insurmountable suffering, once again. Across the world communities remain at risk and our failure to take preventative action will be at the expense of the victims. Making the Genocide Convention a living force in world society is therefore a concrete call for us all to do more. To act.”

The Special Adviser also drew attention to individuals and organizations who are taking on the responsibility to take positive action to promote a culture of peace and non-violence that includes the respect for diversity and non-discrimination, very often in the face of adversity and sometimes danger. They were honored at the event as the 2023 Raphael Lemkin Champions of Prevention. This group includes individuals and organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Cambodia, Iraq, Rwanda, Sudan, United States of America and Cambodia. It also includes a member of a Rohingya women organization and a regional civil society group working for the protection of Roma in Europe.

The event comprised three panel discussions. The first panel, focused on accountability, included remarks by Ms. Silvia Fernandez de Gurmendi, President of the Assembly of States for the Rome Statute; Mr. Karim A. A. Khan, Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court; Mr. Serge Brammertz, Prosecutor of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals; and Mr. Christoph Safferling, Director of the International Nuremberg Principles Academy. Panelists underlined that, while progress has been made in the use of the Convention in legal proceedings, gaps persist. It is only through concerted efforts and collective commitment that the protection of individuals can be prioritized and accountability for perpetrators ensured.

The second panel was centered on reflections on keeping the memory alive, as discussed by Mr. Emir Suljagić, Director of Srebrenica Memorial Center, and Mr. Honore Gatara, Director of Kigali Genocide Memorial. These panelists underscored that, despite ongoing challenges and beyond legal frameworks, the Convention has ensured that atrocity crimes do not occur in silence, and that survivors can amplify their voice with it: both to seek justice and to preserve the facts that are determined with judgements. In some cases, like Rwanda, the spirit of the Convention was adjusted in the work of traditional courts.

The third panel focused on prevention and included remarks by Ms. Graciela Gatti Santana, President of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals; Ms. Felice Gaer, Director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights; Mr. James Waller, Director of the Dodd Human Rights Impact Programs, University of Connecticut; Ms. Farina So, Principal Deputy Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia; and Mr. David Simon, Director of the Genocide Studies Program at Yale University. Interventions at this panel focused on the importance of accountability and justice beyond the courtrooms, including their role as deterrent of future crimes and as foundation for memorialization of what occurred in the past and for countering denial. The role of education was particularly highlighted as essential to prevention.

This commemoration event also included the unveiling of a dedicated artwork by Italian artist Arrigo Musti, which was created specifically for this occasion. Titled “Law of Conservation of Life,” this artwork encourages reflection on the action required to prevent the commission of genocide and related crimes, without which the world suffers.

Today’s event was the main highlight of a series of commemorative activities which have taken place in the last four weeks. These have included an event dedicated to the role of religious leaders in upholding the Convention, held in cooperation with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations; an inter-sessional meeting of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, with a focus on the role of social media; an “afternoon with Raphael Lemkin” event co-organized with the Jacob Blaustein Institute, bringing to light the role of Lemkin in defining and codifying genocide; and a Member States side event with a focus on the critical role of States in ensuring full ratification and implementation of the Convention.