

**Remarks by the United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on the  
Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu**

**Conference on: The Future of Cambodia without Genocide: Prevention and Response through  
Education and Health Care**

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**Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be with you in this conference on: *The Future of Cambodia without Genocide: Prevention and Response through Education and Health Care*. I thank the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Documentation Center for Cambodia for convening this conference.

Last year, in 2023, we commemorated the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1948 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the first international human rights treaty ever adopted by the General Assembly, after the Second World War, to the rallying call of “Never Again.” Our selected theme for the 75th Anniversary was: *“A living force in world society: The Legacy of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.”* This theme originated from Raphael Lemkin, the Polish Jewish lawyer who coined the term ‘genocide’ and who contributed greatly to the process of drafting the Convention. He had hoped that the Genocide Convention would indeed become a living force in world society. This therefore means Prevention of Genocide is at the core of what the United Nations was created for. The Convention emphasizes two important aspects **prevention** and **punishment**, cementing the international recognition of protecting against, an obligation to criminalize and hold accountable perpetrators of genocide, and therefore recognize the suffering of the victims and survivors, but also set a historical record, and play an important role in preventing future genocides and in curtailing attempts to rewrite history and deny the past.

Commendably, Cambodia was among the first countries to accede to this Convention in 1950. Unfortunately, we know, and Cambodia’s own experience shows, that the world has not lived up to this promise of ‘never again’. We also know the devastating consequences that results from the failure to prevent. The horrific crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge period had and continue to have a devastating impact on victims and survivors as well as the society at large.

Cambodia remains for us an example that, if action is taken, much can be achieved. We have also had the opportunity to partner with the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Cambodia to the United Nations in New York on several outreach initiatives, including last year, for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Genocide Convention and for an exhibition at the UN headquarters and I am most grateful to Ambassador Sophia Eat, for her immense support to my mandate.

The Office I lead, the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention, was established to support preventive efforts against the recurrence of genocide and related crimes (war crimes and crimes against humanity), after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the 1995 Srebrenica genocide. Specifically, I am mandated to monitor and raise alarm over situations across the world where there is a risk of genocide and related crimes. I am also mandated to raise awareness on the causes and dynamics of these crimes and to strengthen the capacity of Member States, regional and international organizations, as well as civil society, to prevent them.

My task is not to decide whether genocide or the other crimes, have taken place or are taking place. That is the responsibility of courts of law. My task is forward-looking - to advise the Secretary-General of an impending risk of genocide and propose actions by the Secretary-General and the United Nations system to prevent the risk from escalating.

Yesterday, I visited the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, an important testimony to the 'Power Of Place.' A school, that became a prison torture chamber is now a museum in the space where such horrific crimes took place. I was especially profoundly moved by the look in the eyes of the victims and horrified by the evil genius required in the construction of so many elaborate tools for torture. We have seen this evil genius before in other genocides, all aligned with the same criminal logic. What happened here in Cambodia has provided us with many tough lessons. It has also provided us with a wealth of information. My office, charged with the challenge of genocide prevention, devised an approach to put my almost impossible mandate into practice. Drawing on lessons from Srebrenica, the Holocaust, Cambodia, and Rwanda, among others, we identified and continue to identify risk factors that, cumulatively, lead to an increased risk of genocide.

Our Office developed a *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes*, a risk assessment tool that can be applied to any situation, worldwide which sets out factors that lead to an increased risk of genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity. This is the methodology we use to assess situations across the world and on which we base our early warning. This Framework was developed based on extensive consultations and thorough research of the elements that were present in past instances of commission of such crimes. The verdicts by international tribunals, including analysis of the crime of genocide, were among the resources used to identify these risk factors. Our Office seeks, daily, public and classified information from a wide variety of sources,

including the United Nations, civil society, media and academic experts. Staff members with regional expertise undertake in-depth research into developments that give cause for concern. The framework allows for systematic analysis of qualitative information to assess the risk of genocide.

The mere presence of these risk factors indicates that genocide is a process. A process that has plans, steps, policies, 'deliverables', bureaucratic responsibilities, and timelines for implementation. As such, the process of genocide leaves several entry points for prevention. In every stage in the process, there is action that could be taken to stop the process.

This range of structural policy options to address these risk factors, include strengthening freedom of expression, for people to speak out when they recognize these risk factors, development or strengthening of national and regional mechanisms to enhance good governance, human rights, rule of law and security sector reform where these may have a direct relevance to the prevention of genocide and related crimes. They may include initiatives to develop and implement national action plans for genocide prevention, set up genocide prevention focal points, ensure accountability for perpetrators of genocide and related crimes, broaden participation in decision-making processes, foster confidence building and peaceful co-existence between communities, respond to incitement to violence, advance initiatives that reaffirm the role of women and youth in prevention and prevent the proliferation of arms especially small arms and light weapons. When genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity are imminent, operational policy options for prevention could include development of early warning, assessment and response mechanisms, or assignment of prevention focal point responsibilities.

Yet despite these obvious opportunities for prevention, we must be humble in recognizing that, when it comes to learning the lessons of the past, we as a world have been very slow to put in place effective prevention policies. It is clear, though, that we are, even by having this conference on *The Future of Cambodia without Genocide: Prevention and Response through Education and Health Care*, collectively, taking steps in the right direction.

The situations of ongoing violence for which I have issued alerts for the existence of risk factors for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity – Darfur, Sudan as a country, Gaza and other parts of the Middle East, Democratic Republic of Congo, are reminders of how difficult it is to prevent when the risk factors for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity are all in place in any situation. Prevention cannot begin when populations are facing an imminent risk of violence. Rather, preventive action has to be taken early, to address the possible causes of tensions between groups well before these tensions escalate to a point when it becomes difficult to take action.

Cambodia has taken important steps in prioritizing memorialization, education and learning about genocide and related crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge period. I appreciate Cambodia for taking important steps to include education about this past in the education system. This is a major step as the generation born during these abuses may see what happened as history yet in all societies where such crimes have taken place, the negative impact reverberates also to new generations that live with the legacy of this history. The crimes may stay in the past, but their consequences endure in the present and the future.

My Office has had the great pleasure to work with the Documentation Center for Cambodia over the last several years to strengthen education about past genocides and related crimes, of war crimes and crimes against humanity. This has included training teachers from Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam and the development of learning materials in addressing these difficult topics. We benefited enormously from the experience and work carried out by the Documentation Center, and more specifically the experience and good practice from Cambodia in integrating education about past crimes in its education system. But we all know that educating goes beyond formal academic education. We need to look beyond, to be fully effective. We shall now better harness the positive potential of new technologies to reach new audiences and package messaging on these inherently complex and difficult topics into something that society at large, including the younger generations, can connect to and engage with.

Much of this work has of course been made possible by the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) proceedings and verdicts. The work of the ECCC has allowed for criminal accountability for these crimes for some of the most senior leaders. This includes the conviction of the Democratic Kampuchea's former Head of State, Khieu Sampan, and "Brother Number Two", Nuon Chea for the crime of genocide, related to the ethnic Vietnamese and Cham communities. The court has also made important convictions on crimes against humanity and grave breaches of the Geneva Convention, allowed for many victims and survivors to share their voices, to testify to their experience and to receive reparations. As the ECCC is now in its residual phase, I hope the work of the court, and its contribution to the understanding of the crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge period, can be further integrated into education efforts globally.

We do know that prevention is less publicized because a crisis, conflict or the commission of grave violations and crimes are prevented and did not occur. What we have also learnt from the instances where prevention and response has failed, is that prevention needs to happen early, must involve all of society, and be anchored in understanding and addressing all the risk factors of these crimes.

Let me conclude by highlighting the importance, in all of this, of putting front and center the voices, views and concerns of victims and survivors. Had it not been for their testimonies, reliving their trauma, accountability might not have been possible. They spearheaded efforts around education and memorialization, including awareness raising for younger generations, ensuring that the past is not forgotten. I will continue to amplify and support their voices.

Thank you and I look forward to the important deliberations we will have throughout this conference. You can count on my full support, and that of my Office, in this work.