

## **Confronting the challenge of preventing atrocity crimes in 2013**

By Adama Dieng \*

As we head into 2013, the crises in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Sudan and Syria serve as tragic reminders of the challenges that remain in the struggle to protect populations from atrocity crimes, namely genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. We are faced with daily media reports of violence and of gross human rights violations, including against women and children, that remind us that we must do more to protect populations.

With this constant barrage of bad news, it is tempting to overlook the progress made. Despite ongoing crises, the international community has made important advances over the past years. An impressive range of global, regional and national initiatives have helped to identify and mitigate sources of risk, build and strengthen local resilience to violence, encourage creative ways to manage diversity peacefully, resolve tensions before they escalate and tackle factors that inflame hatred.

At the 2005 World Summit, all Heads of State and of Government unanimously committed to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, the most serious of crimes. This responsibility already existed under international law. Yet their plain-worded statement in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document that “We accept that responsibility and will act in accordance with it”, provided new impetus, under the umbrella of what has since become known as the ‘responsibility to protect’.

The atrocity prevention efforts of the United Nations and its partners play a vital role in helping to reduce the number of crises. They support national and local capacities to stem tensions and resolve conflicts before they become deadly. The United Nations works with regional and sub-regional arrangements, national governments and civil society, including human rights organisations and women’s groups. This collaborative approach focuses on understanding risks and building capacities to mitigate them, including by supporting communities. It seeks to foster a culture of prevention and respect for human rights. This approach is about building understanding of how eruptions of violence can lead to atrocity crimes. It is about building awareness of the dangers of hate speech and incitement to violence, and addressing them while ensuring respect for human rights.

And, when crises seem imminent, this approach is about getting the analysis right and marshalling the resources of the United Nations and the political will of the broader international community to prevent them from escalating.

Significant advances in atrocity prevention have also been made outside of the United Nations. A number of Member States have created focal points on the responsibility to protect or internal inter-agency structures for the prevention of atrocity crimes, such as the American Government’s Atrocities Prevention Board. Regionally, 18 States in Latin America have established a network for the prevention of genocide. In Africa, the African Union has taken important steps to institutionalise its commitment to

protect civilians from atrocity crimes. The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (of Africa), a sub-regional organisation, has established a Regional Committee for the prevention and punishment of genocide and related crimes. This is the world's first sub-regional mechanism created specifically to address these issues. In the Middle East, civil society organisations are documenting human rights violations and building peace and tolerance between communities, including through social media. Think tanks and academia from around the world continue to provide intellectual leadership and sound advice.

Over the past few years, collective efforts have rendered results. The crisis in a disputed territory between Sudan and South Sudan, Abyei, as well as the crises in Guinea, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan and Yemen were resolved through diplomatic means, without protracted fighting and mass bloodshed. While continued international engagement on those countries remains essential, we can affirm that political leadership was fundamental in achieving these modest successes.

The overwhelming task of atrocity prevention requires everyone's commitment. The political will of Member States remains paramount. The ongoing crises around the world — from Mali to Myanmar — highlight how progress is ultimately contingent on the will of national governments and on their capacity to move in the same direction.

Member States have a crucial and unique role, be it through proactive and preventative action or, when required, through timely and decisive response, within the provisions of the United Nations Charter. When it comes to protecting populations, the United Nations and its partners can only complement their efforts. The Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect is determined to continue working with Member States, and to encourage the assumption of the full responsibility and the strengthening of the political leadership required to deliver on the promise of “never again” and make the responsibility to protect “a living reality”.

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