

Speech on the Prevention and Elimination of Mass Atrocities
May 9, 2012

Honourable senators, I began my presentation some time ago. I would now like to continue my speech on this subject, which, I believe, is particularly relevant.

The theme is Canada's continued lack of commitment to the prevention and elimination of mass atrocities and making 2012 as the year of prevention as requested by the United Nations.

Eighteen years ago, the United Nations eviscerated my mission in Rwanda, rendering it incapable of responding to the impending genocide. That catastrophic mission was the product of the unpreparedness of the world's countries to act in the face of genocide. Therefore, it is not lightly that I bring to the attention of honourable senators an issue of the highest importance not only to Canada's security and morality but to its international stature.

Our government still does not have the necessary tools within its foreign policy and defence architecture to take principled and informed action on potential and precipitating mass atrocities — genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

It is imperative that we take immediate action to remedy this lack of capacity. We cannot and must not ignore the progression of history and the demands of our time.

Remember, it was the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust that demanded we vow "never again." That promise gave rise to the resolution condemning the crimes against humanity in 1946 and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Geneva Conventions in 1949.

Human frailty, fear and ignorance conspired against these noble laws. Our institutions reflected the fact that we were too insecure, impotent and afraid to do anything about threats that we treated as unknowable and untreatable — primordial evils. We acted as though if we ignored them, they would go away.

What I saw with my own eyes in Rwanda cannot be ignored. The ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from which I have recently returned and which is a direct result of genocide in Rwanda, shows us that atrocities do not disappear; they escalate.

These missteps once again reinforce the necessity of developing mechanisms for and of the prevention and elimination of mass atrocities.

Mechanisms such as the international criminal tribunals of Rwanda, Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone, which by 1998 were joined by the permanent International Criminal Court in The Hague, are working to eliminate impunity.

These mechanisms are our common heritage. We were at the forefront of establishing the International Criminal Court. And we are the ones who developed the responsibility to protect, which affirms:

That every State has the responsibility to protect its populations from mass atrocity crimes, that the international community has the responsibility to encourage and assist

individual States in meeting that responsibility, and that if a State is manifestly failing to protect its populations, the international community must be prepared to take appropriate collective action, in a timely and decisive manner and in accordance with the UN Charter.

Responsibility to protect is now deeply embedded in the 2005 World Summit Outcome document, multiple Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, and the UN's Joint Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect created by Kofi Annan in 2004.

What was only an idea 10 years ago is a reality today. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently said, "Responsibility to protect is here to stay."

Honourable senators, I am not simply asking you to be moved because you find egregious violations of human rights against fellow human beings detestable. I am calling on you to take notice of the global changes that necessitate us to view the prevention of mass atrocity crimes as central to our own interests. The issue of mass atrocities is moving governments and international organizations to action. There is progress. The question is: What about us?

Since 2005, mass atrocities have been central to the mobilization of the African Union and the UN in Sudan. I was recently there, including South Sudan and, of course, Darfur. More recently, they were the central determining factor in the 2011 UN-sanctioned NATO mission in Libya, which we commanded, and the French UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire, which ended in success. Both were supported by the Arab League and the African Union respectively.

We know mass atrocities are moving governments because we sent our young men and women to Libya. Yet, despite this, we are unable to confront these challenges in a principled and structured way. We have not taken any steps to institutionalize the prevention and elimination of mass atrocities within our foreign policy and defence strategies. Instead, we treat these crises as one-off situations that can be responded to on an ad hoc basis, depending on what other countries do and want to do. Essentially, we are going at it as a crisis management and not as a deliberate process within our institutions to give them the tools to be proactive and probably far more effective.

Internal conflicts are an unfortunate but real symptom of the shift from dictatorships to democracy. They are also characteristic of failed or failing states. We know this from experience and a great deal of analysis, particularly over the last twenty years since the end of the Cold War. Insofar as people continue to liberate themselves from the grips of authoritarian tyranny and insofar as certain states remain unable to fulfill their function, there will be violent conflict; and where there is violent conflict, there shall be mass atrocities, abuse of human rights and crimes against humanity. It is the nature of civil wars. It is the nature of failing states and of those who will achieve maintaining power at the destruction of their own people.

This has been proven time and time again, and it continues to be the case today. Look at Syria. We cannot in good faith preach the gospel of human dignity and democracy and then turn our backs on those who suffer the most extreme forms of persecution. To do so would not only be a disservice to the victims of mass atrocities but also a disservice to ourselves and our ethical standing in respect of human rights — an element that is a fundamental law of our nation.

Mass atrocities undermine global peace and security. They increase the likelihood of terrorism, create breeding grounds for diseases and pandemics, destabilize regions and spread conflict. These are matters of primary concern to any state, but especially to ours, which has a strong tradition of international leadership. We cannot allow ourselves to fall into a reactive posture. The future must not shape us; we must shape the future.

At the same time, we cannot be blind to the difficulties of preventing and eliminating mass atrocities. There is no quick fix. Our forces served honourably in Libya; we should be proud of what we did. We saved lives and helped a fledgling democracy.

But we need to ask ourselves if we could have done more and if we should be doing more right now. The protection of civilians does not begin and end with establishing a no-fly zone and hoping for the best.

Similarly, we must expand our sights beyond the costly and weighty choice to approach each crisis through the lens of intervention. Atrocities continue to happen in Sudan because the UN lacks the equipment to deploy the forces it already has on the ground. Should we be contributing more there? Are we doing enough with our diplomatic corps? We cannot approach these difficult and complex issues intelligently and effectively until we have a coherent policy for the prevention and elimination of mass atrocities. If we cannot have a leadership role, then let us participate in some other way.

Other countries around the world are already making the necessary changes to their institutions. Notably, President Obama recently released a presidential directive making the prevention of genocide and other mass atrocities a core national security interest and moral responsibility for the United States. It called for the creation of an interagency atrocity prevention board in the National Security Council and an interagency study for the development of an atrocity and prevention policy. It is a whole-of-government policy that he is seeking.

The U.S. Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute responded with a mass atrocity prevention and response option called the MAPRO strategy.

Two weeks ago, President Obama announced that the primary pieces of their atrocity and prevention strategy are coming together. The main component is the Atrocities Prevention Board, which was accompanied by a number of concrete and innovative policies and mechanisms for the prevention and elimination of mass atrocities.

I do not have to impress upon honourable senators the significance of steps taken by the Americans, our closest allies, our partners in NATO and the predominant military and economic power in the world today, with whom we have conducted so many operations in the past.

I do want to impress on honourable senators that they took these steps in response to the demands of our times and through the consultation of recommendations from reports prepared by the Genocide Prevention Task Force in the U.S. as well as the Will to Intervene report in Canada. While the Will to Intervene report has found success at the highest levels of government in the U.S. it has received little to no response at the federal level here. The Will to Intervene report and recommendations came out of the Montreal Institute of Genocide and Human Rights Studies at Concordia University.

Honourable senators, are we to be blind to the pressing demands of our time and deaf to the recommendations of experts within our very borders? Shall we ignore what experience has taught us and what each coming day confirms? The problem of mass atrocities will not go away until we direct our efforts toward the prevention and elimination of them. Rwanda did not go away; the same is true for the crimes occurring today in Sudan, in the DRC and in Syria. God knows how many others are being lined up. We cannot ignore these situations and hope that they will go away or that their effects will not reach us. We cannot stumble into these situations with the hope that someone else will determine our foreign policy response. We cannot approach these challenges with the same mindset and tools that we have used in the past, that is, "ad hoc-ing" it and crisis managing it. To do so would not only be irresponsible, it would also be putting people, and the success of the mission, clearly at risk.

Because of time, I will go to my final comments. I have four recommendations that are part of the text, but I will go to my concluding remarks.

We must not undermine Canada's heritage by failing to uphold the humanitarian values that we have worked so hard to establish. We must move beyond the ad hoc approach that has characterized the Canadian response to mass atrocities thus far and develop the necessary tools within our foreign policy and defence architecture to take principled and informed action toward the prevention and elimination of mass atrocities. We have been in it since 1991. Surely we can bring all of this together after two decades of critical involvement.

In doing so, we shall not only be meeting our international responsibilities, we shall be re-establishing control over our own foreign policy and retaking our position as a global leader in the pursuit of international peace and justice.

The UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, diplomat, author, eminent scholar and friend, Francis Deng, was recently in Ottawa to help me mark the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Mass Atrocities. In discussing the situations in Libya and Syria, he concluded with these wise words:

But it also goes to show that prevention before situations escalate is the best course of action. Because if you engage governments early on, before they become defensive, much can be done to avert this critical choice between either military engagement or indifference.

Deciding not to act is a decision.

Honourable senators, I have spoken to a great deal today, and you are probably wondering, "What now?" As a modest first step and with Dr. Deng's message in mind, I believe we should take the Secretary-General's recent challenge and make at least 2012 the year of prevention and ask that the Minister of Foreign Affairs consider moving down a road similar to the one President Obama has established with regard to mass atrocities and the prevention thereof