

Statement on the World Day for International Justice, 2021

Tomorrow, 17 July, marks the World Day for International Justice. In celebration of this day, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect commends the enduring commitment of various states, multilateral institutions and civil society to upholding their responsibility to protect by pursuing justice for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. This annual commemoration is an important moment to acknowledge achievements made in fighting impunity and to raise awareness about the challenges that remain.

The past year saw two landmark legal cases. On 4 February the Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Court (ICC) found former Lord's Resistance Army commander Dominic Ongwen guilty of 61 counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in northern Uganda between 1 July 2002 and 31 December 2005. This case marked the first time the ICC considered the offences of forced pregnancy and forced marriage as war crimes, contributing to the development of international jurisprudence.

On 8 June the Appeals Chamber of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals confirmed the November 2017 conviction of Ratko Mladić, the former Commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, who was found guilty of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Mladić was one of the most notorious atrocity perpetrators of the wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s and was a fugitive from justice for more than a decade.

We have also seen significant advances in applying the principle of universal jurisdiction, whereby perpetrators of grave international crimes can be prosecuted domestically irrespective of the citizenship of the perpetrators or victims, or where the crimes were committed. For example, on 22 February the Koblenz Higher Regional Court in Germany sentenced Eyad al-Gharib for aiding and abetting 30 cases of crimes against humanity in Syria. This historic case was the world's first criminal trial addressing torture perpetrated by Syrian state officials since the conflict began in 2011.

Over the past year, both the Netherlands and Canada have also initiated proceedings under the UN Convention against Torture in an attempt to hold the Syrian government accountable for its widespread and systematic use of torture. Such cases demonstrate that even in situations where the UN Security Council is divided and incapable of responding appropriately to ongoing atrocities, individual states can still uphold international law and their responsibility to protect.

The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect would also like to acknowledge the retirement of ICC Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, whose exemplary leadership over the past nine years put victims and survivors at the center of the Court's work. We warmly welcome Karim Khan as the new Chief Prosecutor and look forward to working with him in his new role.

Despite progress over the past year, civilians who continue to face atrocities in Myanmar, South Sudan, Tigray (Ethiopia), Yemen and elsewhere are still waiting for their day in court. On this day we reiterate our commitment to ensuring that all victims and survivors of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity receive the recognition and justice they deserve.