

Statement on the 75th Anniversary of the Genocide Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On 9 and 10 December the international community will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These historic anniversaries should serve as reminders from history that the world must no longer tolerate political indifference and inaction whenever and wherever populations face an imminent risk of genocide and other mass atrocity crimes.

In the wake of a war characterized by widespread civilian suffering and the systematic extermination of millions of people during the Holocaust, the international community collectively proclaimed, for the first time, a set of fundamental human rights to be universally protected and put human beings – not power politics – at the heart of the agenda. At the same time, the new United Nations organization also defined and outlawed the crime of genocide with the adoption of the Genocide Convention.

The values enshrined in both the Genocide Convention and Universal Declaration are as relevant today as they were 75 years ago. Both outline a vision of a world where genocide and other mass atrocity crimes are to be prevented and punished, as well as advance a promise of dignity, protection and justice for all people.

More than seven decades on, the Universal Declaration has transformed from an aspirational treaty to a set of global standards that underpins nearly every area of international law. Notably, the Universal Declaration marked a pivotal shift by daring to say that all human beings are free and equal, inspiring millions to claim and fight for human rights. Around the world, human rights defenders and affected populations – often in the most dangerous of circumstances – are on the frontlines defending and advancing the rights and responsibilities set out in the Universal Declaration and Genocide Convention through their work, dedication and personal sacrifice. The international community should meaningfully support and engage with civil society and affected populations, recognizing them as critical partners in the fulfillment and realization of these aspirational documents.

Despite the progress made, it is important to acknowledge the gap between promise and implementation. In the past 75 years, we have witnessed multiple instances where the international community ignored early warning signs or failed to take timely and decisive collective action. There have been numerous failures to uphold universal human rights and prevent genocide and populations around the world continue to face the threat of genocide and other mass atrocity crimes not for anything they have done, but for who they are. In China, the government is perpetrating possible acts of genocide by systematically persecuting the ethnic Uyghur community, as well as other predominantly Muslim and/or Turkic groups. Since clashes erupted in Sudan on 15 April between the military and paramilitary forces, populations from non-Arab communities in the Darfur region have faced ethnically charged violence and the risk of genocide. Since early October unfathomable horrors have unfolded in Israel and Gaza, with several UN officials issuing warnings of a risk of genocide and ethnic cleansing against the Palestinian people.

Meanwhile, governments and politicians around the globe are increasingly focusing on narrow, nationalist interests while eroding respect for international norms and laws, threatening to reverse decades of progress. This global assault on human rights norms and institutions has weakened the international community's ability to act in a comprehensive and consistent manner in the face of mass atrocities. All too often the effectiveness of the UN in responding to mass atrocity situations remains prisoner to partisan political interests and/or the veto prerogative of the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

While there have been significant advances with regard to international justice and the principle of universal jurisdiction, the international community also continues to struggle to end impunity and ensure accountability for those who violate the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration and Genocide Convention.

In an effort to live up to the pledges enshrined in the UN Charter and fulfill the promise of “never again,” the international community adopted the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle at the 2005 World Summit. Just as the Universal Declaration and Genocide Convention represent the vision of a world where all human beings can live free and equal in dignity and rights, R2P is a promise to act on behalf of people for whom mass atrocities are not abstract words, but real acts that pose an existential threat to them, their loved ones and communities. By committing to uphold their responsibility to protect at the World Summit, the international community promised to turn words into deeds, and to actively prevent mass atrocity crimes wherever and whenever they are threatened.

We must strengthen multilateral human rights institutions – not defund, undermine or threaten them. There must be a systematic inclusion of an atrocity prevention lens in all human rights mechanisms and institutions, so that early warning signs and risk factors for atrocity crimes can be identified. This must also be accompanied by increased international will to cooperate with and act on the recommendations made by these mechanisms.

The work the international community must do to uphold the aspirations outlined in both treaties is far from over. As the international community commemorates these milestone anniversaries, we encourage all states to reaffirm this solemn commitment to “never again” for those around the world today who remain at risk of these unconscionable crimes.