

Statement Commemorating Genocide Prevention and Awareness Month and the Responsibility to Protect at 20

April marks Genocide Prevention and Awareness Month, a time to reflect on the history, causes and victims of past genocides and to mobilize the necessary resolve to confront risks facing populations around the world today who face the threat of genocide and other mass atrocity crimes not for anything they have done, but for who they are.

As we solemnly observe this month of commemoration, we also reflect on the 20th anniversary of the UN General Assembly's unanimous adoption of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle – a concept which emerged in particular response to the international community's failure to prevent the atrocity crimes committed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

By shifting the focus to *every* state's 'responsibility to protect' rather than the big powers' 'right to intervene,' by emphasizing prevention as well as reaction, and by committing to international collective action – including, when necessary, through the collective security provisions of the UN Charter – R2P made possible a global consensus completely lacking in previous decades. The 2005 World Summit brought us closer than ever to translating the post-Holocaust dream of “never again” into a meaningful reality. It was a significant diplomatic achievement for all heads of state and government worldwide to acknowledge that genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing – even when committed within a sovereign state – are matters of *international* concern and thus demand timely and decisive response.

But 20 years later – with all too obvious horrors and civilian suffering still occurring in Gaza, Sudan, the DRC, Myanmar and elsewhere – it is clear that R2P is still at best a work in progress. It is time to reflect on what we have learned about preventing and responding to the atrocity crimes outlined in the World Summit Outcome Document, and to focus on how we can do better.

On the plus side, considerable progress has been made in our collective knowledge of the risk factors, causes and dynamics that drive mass atrocity crimes and in enhancing our responsiveness to warning signs, including through the development of the UN's Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes. There is now a solid understanding of the wide range of preventive measures available, which includes not only a response to imminent and emerging risks, but also instituting policies, practices and structures that build long-term societal resilience to atrocity crimes. Alongside these advances is a growing awareness that the different tools available for changing the behavior of would-be perpetrators, or for making victims less vulnerable, must be situated in a more coherent preventive strategy that is tailored to each context.

Moreover, the atrocity prevention agenda has been operationalized across the UN system. The creation of the Joint Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect has been central to strengthening the UN's early warning capabilities, as well as for developing the conceptual and practical aspects of R2P. Since the inception of the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect role, successive Special Advisers have been instrumental in identifying risk factors and clarifying best practices by states, regional organizations and the UN system in response to the threat of atrocity crimes.

In addition, the regular cycle of UN Secretary-General reports and General Assembly debates has reinforced the principle and fostered greater consensus and shared understanding within the UN system. The Group of Friends of R2P, with over 55 members from across all regions, is an important mobilizing force within the UN to advance effective atrocity crime prevention and response.

Over 60 countries from all regions of the world, along with the European Union and Organization of American States, have also appointed an R2P Focal Point, an important step for institutionalizing atrocity prevention at the national level. The appointment of a national R2P Focal Point is crucial for strengthening domestic capacity to fulfill the responsibility to protect, including by improving intra-governmental and inter-governmental efforts to prevent and halt atrocity crimes.

Furthermore, the international community has also made strides in its willingness and capacity to hold perpetrators responsible through international investigative bodies and mechanisms, international courts and tribunals, and in national courts under the principle of universal jurisdiction. Transitional justice and memorialization also remain hallmarks of a broader commitment to deal with the past and promote truth, justice and non-recurrence.

Nonetheless, for all these significant institutional advances, we are all acutely aware that 20 years on from the World Summit, the principle of R2P is under acute strain. There is a deeply troubling disconnect between the unanimous commitment to protecting populations from atrocity crimes and achieving consistent implementation and concrete preventive action. All too often, effective national, regional and international action is inhibited by self-interested political arguments advanced in key institutions with a capacity to make a difference, including the UN Security Council. When principles and their practical application are contested it is time, more than ever, for UN member states to stand firm and do the hard work of continuing to find and build the consensus needed to protect populations at risk.

Moreover, there is a worrying decline in attention to atrocity crime prevention and the role of the Special Adviser on R2P within the UN Secretariat. This stands in stark contrast to the still very strong support from the great majority of UN member states and from civil society, human rights defenders, affected communities and victims' and survivors' groups around the world.

To consolidate the effectiveness of R2P, there is much more that needs to be done, and the work needs to start at home – not least at the UN Headquarters, but also on a national and regional level. At the core of R2P is a responsibility to invest in the institutional architecture to prevent the drivers of atrocity crimes from emerging or intensifying. This anniversary year presents a crucial opportunity for the UN system, and particularly the UN Secretary-General and the Secretariat, to demonstrate ongoing commitment to fulfilling the responsibility to protect across all regions of the world.

The UN has proven time and again that it can mobilize resources and expertise to safeguard those at risk, with a notable track record of defending human rights and protecting vulnerable populations despite facing immense challenges. Rather than retreating from these efforts, it is critical that the UN and its member states redouble them, by honing and strengthening the capabilities needed to deliver effective prevention and response. Political and ideological differences must not be allowed to distract us from identifying signs of increased risk, wherever they may be, and taking early action to prevent atrocity crimes.

The strong commitments made in 2005 are as relevant today as they were 20 years ago. At a time of escalating conflicts, as well as threats to multilateralism and international justice, the UN Secretary-General and the UN must provide an alternative vision for the future in which a key element is the consistent implementation of R2P.

The future of R2P will only be secured if we – the UN system, intergovernmental and regional organizations, governments, civil society organizations and affected communities – fight for it and generate the political will to act. It would be a tragedy to give in to cynicism and skepticism, to overlook the continuing power of R2P as an inspiring ideal and to abandon the goal of seeing it fully and effectively implemented in all its dimensions.

This month of commemoration must serve as a reminder that indifference and inaction should never be an acceptable response whenever and wherever populations face the threat of genocide and other atrocity crimes.

This statement was written by Professor the Hon. Gareth Evans and Dr. Jennifer Welsh, Co-Chairs of the Global Centre's International Advisory Board.