

EVAP Episode 43 Adama Dieng

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SPEAKERS

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Adama Dieng



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:00

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Director of Policy and Research at the Global Centre. This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:44

Today, I am joined by Adama Dieng, the African Union Special Envoy on the Prevention of Genocide and Other Mass Atrocities, and the Deputy Chair of the Global Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking. Mr. Dieng established the Pan-African Alliance for Transparency and Rule of Law, and was previously the UN Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide. We are interviewing Mr. Dieng as part of our series commemorating the 20th anniversary of R2P this year. Thank you so much for joining us today.



Adama Dieng 01:14

Thank you for having me.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:16

Mr. Dieng, you've had an illustrious career in the genocide and atrocity prevention space, including serving for years as the UN Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide. For those who do not know you as well as the Global Centre does, can you walk us through your background in this field and how you first became involved in genocide prevention?

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Adama Dieng 01:37

Well, I would say that my first encounter with the "g-word", genocide, was when I was eight years old. I was in Gorée Island, and the curator of the House of Slaves, narrating what happened in that island, Gorée Island, which is off Dakar, 20 minutes by boat, was saying that there were tens of millions of African who were traded by European traders. That was the transatlantic trade, and they were being taken from Gorée Island was the last point to the Americas, the door of non-return. And he used the word genocide. He said, this was a genocide. And of course, it didn't fit much to me at the time, except that it was simply shocking to see human beings treated like slaves and sold like just product, and then later on, when I became an adult, I started, of course, reading about genocide, and the first was about the Holocaust and what happened in Europe during the Second World War. And it was simply something shocking, and which is why today, I'm extremely concerned, to say the least, when I see what is happening in Gaza, what is happening in Sudan. So to me, of course, my training as a lawyer, which took me from Senegal, where I was working as a registrar at the Supreme Court. From there, I moved to Geneva to become the legal officer for Africa at the International Commission of Jurists at the Geneva-based rule of law organization. From that time, I had to follow, of course, closely human rights situation in all parts of the world. And I remember even at that time when later, when I became the Secretary-General of the International Commission of Jurists in 1990, I was already following the situation in Rwanda, but also following the situation in Cambodia. And I remember at the Human Rights Commission, I was arguing that what was happening in Cambodia was genocide. Remember at that time, the US delegation was not sharing that view, but later on, I was pleased to see that the US came as among the first states to support the Cambodia Tribunal. Simply to say that throughout my career, I have witnessed so many horrors, not least what happened on the soil of Africa, what happened in Rwanda in 1994, the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsis, and this was simply something which could have been prevented. Myself, I was in Rwanda at the end of March, and as a matter of fact, I was the last person to be received by the then President Habyarimana, he had a meeting with the US ambassador, and then he met with me. And from that time he left, went to Gisyeni, then Gbadolite to meet with President Mobutu, Dar es Salaam for the meeting regarding the implementation of the Arusha Accord, and the way back, the plane crashed, it was attacked. So it was to me, really something I would never forget. Not something, a subject, I address lightly, and that's why even using the g-word to me is something I say always, "people, don't think that until you use the g-word, you are not facing a situation which deserves our attention". No, there are serious crimes being committed, crimes against humanity, war crimes which deserve our attention. Because to me, the task of prevention of genocide is a frightening and challenging responsibility. So it is, however, not an impossible mission, and that is why I did not hesitate after serving as the Registrar of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, to accept the position of Special Advisor of the Secretary-General at the time, Ban Ki Moon, to advise on the prevention of genocide. I think I was the longest serving Registrar of the International Criminal Tribunal, the longest serving Special Advisor on Prevention of Genocide. But sincerely, I wish this type of job no longer exists. I wish that we no longer have history of genocide, crimes

against humanity, war crimes, that the world just gets reconciled with itself, that we definitely go back to what we committed in 1945 when we adopted the UN Charter, and then when we adopted, one day before the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention for the Prevention and the Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. I should say that during my eight-year assignment as Special Advisor, one of the highest priorities has been to translate the concept of genocide prevention as an international norm into a practical reality that can be implemented at the national and regional levels. In discharging my mandate, I was guided by my firm belief that no society is immune from atrocity crimes, by which I mean genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing. But also they are not immune to their risk factors. And my conviction is that the earlier and the deeper the seeds of atrocity crimes prevention are, the better and more sustainable their fruits will be. You know, that's why, going from the collection and analysis of information we were receiving on genocide risk, I had of 10, of course, to follow up on the sources that issued because it is important to make sure that you have credible sources. But later on, what I found also extremely important was to develop a framework of analysis for of atrocity crimes. You know, a tool which is used to assess the risk of genocide and other atrocity crimes, and the other, I think, important aspect I noticed was the early warning, because when we speak about genocide, it's because we know that genocide is a process. It is not something which happened overnight. It requires resources, quiet planning, and we can identify easily the early warning, you know, activities which, of course, have to involve issuing a public statement to submitting advisory notes to the Secretary-General, briefing the Security Council. And this is important, because until I joined and occupied that position, the Security Council was reluctant to engage with the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide. You know, even my good friend Juan Mendez earlier, once he arrived and they refused to allow him to speak. But to me, it is something important, because thanks to that possibility of engaging with the Security Council, at least, there are two situations where I would say that we were quote, unquote successful in our prevention strategy. That was the case of Central African Republic in the case of South Sudan. And I will come back later also on South Sudan, in light of what is happening right now in our eyes in both Sudan and South Sudan. But to illustrate, when I address it, the Council on the situation which was prevailing in the Central African Republic, then PR [Permanent Representative] of the United States of America, Samantha Power, who herself, is someone who is knowledgeable about genocide, because she wrote about it, a powerful book on genocide, and she was saying, colleagues, no one would say tomorrow, we didn't know. Special Adviser Dieng has spoken, so we need to take action. And then this was echoed by the UK PR, and following that, the United States, which was reluctant about the establishment of a mission to Central African Republic, instructed that they start negotiating a resolution which led to the establishment of MINUSCA. So in South Sudan, the same, we were able to secure even the Security Council adopting a resolution in which they instructed the SRG, head of UNMISS in South Sudan, to work closely with the Special Advisor in monitoring and addressing the issue of hate speech in South Sudan. So simply to say that when I decided to step down from my position, I thought that I will not get again involved in this very difficult task, as I said, task which is frightening and challenging, but you know, you will never, never abandon what is important when it comes to saving lives.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 13:44

And on that note of being called back into this field, could you talk a little about the significance of your appointment as the first ever AU Special Envoy for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Mass Atrocities, especially at a time when there are concerning developments in various parts of Africa, including, as you mentioned, Sudan?

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Adama Dieng 14:06

We have to be more active, because what is happening in Sudan right now is simply unacceptable. And as a matter of fact, one of the first notes I produced as Special Envoy of the African Union for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Mass Atrocities was a note, a confidential note, focusing on Sudan, El-Fasher, and I was of the view at that time that it was urgent that a ceasefire in El-Fasher be pursued, because the violence at that time, including sexual violence, was clearly identity-based and the atrocities at that time, from my view, could pave the way for a genocide. So I had to remind the Chairperson of the African Union that we have the obligation to further denounce what is being done and what is being prepared, as we cannot fail to assist the people in danger. So I was of the view that Srebrenica, Rwanda, which were supposed to host sanctuaries sheltering people, would pale in comparison to what could happen in El-Fasher. El-Fasher, at that time –that was in May 2024– was already the scene of famine and a catastrophic humanitarian situation. I made a call for the AU the world to get mobilized and myself, of course, I was determined to contribute to that mobilization so as to prevent a catastrophe. Unfortunately, we did not succeed in getting that mobilization and until the beginning January, just before leaving his position, Anthony Blinken, at the time, State Secretary, declared that what happened in Sudan, is a genocide perpetrated by the Rapid Support Forces. And of course, he highlighted also other atrocities committed by the Sudan Armed Forces. So this is simply to say that it is important that we don't simply stop with establishing mandate, be it at the UN, be it at the African Union, but we need to stand up and to be firm whenever we see that the risk is high and could lead to the perpetration of this most horrendous crime, which is the crime of genocide. So, this is to say, coming back to my new role as the AU first Special Envoy for the Prevention of the Crime of Genocide and Other Mass Atrocities, I would start by simply saying and reminding each of us that Africa is a continent rich in diversity and value systems. So the member state of the African Union, the AU, have a complex context of historical, social, economic and political interactions, which requires concerted efforts to promote mutual trust, tolerance, respect and reconciliation in order to inculcate a culture of peaceful coexistence among its people, anchored on values enshrined in Ubuntu: I am because you are. In this regard. If you take Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, or if you take the Aspiration 4 and 5 of Agenda 2063, they reaffirm respect for the sanctity of human life as enshrined in various regional and international instruments, including the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948 so one would have hoped that, with all these obligations, the member states will be prompted to take action. When I refer to Article 4(h), let me spell it. Article 4(h) relates to what I call the principle of non-interference. This article was adopted as the lessons learned from the failure of the Organization of African Unity in 1994 in Rwanda, and say that the conference, the assembly of heads of state and government, shall intervene whenever a situation shows that there is a risk of genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes, so they should intervene militarily to prevent that to happen. But, it has not been used. It has not been used, except there has been an attempt in the end of 2015 when I alerted, at that time as UN, about the risk

of genocide in Burundi. At that time, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union also almost reached the same conclusion and subsequently adopted the communiqué calling for the deployment of 5,000 troops in Burundi. While at that time, the Security Council requested the Secretary-General of the UN to table a proposal, and the proposal was the maximum was 3,000, then 250, and this was not accepted by Burundi. Burundi came with a proposal of having the deployment of 30 police officers. And this simply shows that we cannot continue to consider the principle of sovereignty as sacred when you have the sanctity of life, which is rarely being completely ignored. And as my predecessor in New York, Francis Deng, used to say, sovereignty is responsibility. A state cannot hide behind sovereignty to let its population be exterminated, be killed, be victim of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. So this is something we need to really revisit more often to see how one can reconcile the principle of sovereignty and the respect of the "never again".

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 22:21

Your appointment by the African Union comes at a time when the continent is enduring multiple atrocity situations with unfortunately little attention from the wider international community. You've already mentioned what's happening in Sudan, but obviously there's also extensive atrocities in DRC, South Sudan and elsewhere. You know, what efforts are you currently undertaking to execute your new mandate, and what sort of tools do you have at your disposal when mass atrocities are imminent?

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Adama Dieng 22:53

Well, I should say that, first of all, it was an important and historic decision for the African Union to establish this mandate, because although the AU has placed both institutional and normative frameworks to undertake and support prevention activities within the AU system, there was no such position which could help, in fact, the AU to fully align and provide really what is crucial. For example, if you take the commitment and obligation of the AU to prevent mass atrocities on the continent, as I illustrated earlier, when referring to Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act, I mean, while you have the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, which provide a framework for the African Union to also promote and protect human rights. We may wonder, what at the end of the day, the Special Envoy would bring, you know, and I think, for the outgoing Chairperson of the African Union, when he considered my appointment, I think he took note of my track record of leadership and experience to holistically move forward the AU agenda in this regard, you know, through engagement with policy makers and political actors at the highest level of government and non-government settings. And it is in fact, in this regard that last November, I undertook my first field visit. I went to DRC, I went to Rwanda and I went to South Sudan. I wanted also to visit Sudan itself. So this was my first priority, because I saw that the situation in DRC and South Sudan, if not addressed with a sense of urgency regarding the prevention of atrocity crimes may really lead to the killings of thousands of people, to say the least. So now, when you look what is happening, I can say, certainly I didn't succeed, but I can say that the leaders, the African leaders, bear a huge responsibility. Because despite the fact that efforts have been made, and particularly through the process led by Angola, and I should here congratulate warmly the President of Angola for his commitment in trying to bring the crisis in in the eastern part of DRC to a fruition where the people, the members of the M23, backed by Rwanda, and the DRC authorities will silence the gun. He was, I can say, almost

desperate. And I hope now that he is, he has become, for one year, the new President of the African Union, I hope his dedication for peace in Africa and the new Chairperson of the African Union – they met on March 13 in Addis Ababa, when the new Chairperson took his office and commitment was made to really strengthen the mandate of the Special Envoy for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Mass Atrocities. And I do believe that we cannot fail anymore African people. The world is changing; we have entered a new era, an era where we have seen it in the Sahel part of Africa, which is my next priority, my next visit will take place in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where also we have been witnessing the rise of hate speech, where members of the Fulani community, also Peul, have been stigmatized. Hopefully, efforts are being made by the government of those countries, but we need more. We need more to address the hate speech against the Fulani community. It's not because you are a Fula, that you are a jihadist. We need also to look more seriously about atrocities committed by external forces like the Wagner, the Russian security on the ground, who are operating in those countries, along with the army of those countries. We have seen also in some of those countries, civil defense being put in place, but we need, we need, definitely to invest more on education to prevention in those countries. That's why, alongside of my getting familiarized with the situation on the ground, I will offer to those countries, what I can offer to them in terms of designing framework for them to strengthen the atrocity prevention in their respective countries. The African Union is resolved to observe no rest and trying to address the challenges we are facing today. However, the problem remains that whenever you speak about developing atrocity prevention programs you will need resources, and resources are today very scarce, and that is why, in my new position, I'm not sure that I will be able to achieve much unless we got the support. I recently spoke with one foreign, European country seeking support. But the response was, well, we sympathize with you, but unfortunately, our budget for development now is being moved towards our budget for defense and security. However, we will try to see how much we can provide you. So you see we are facing challenges which are created by the various crises we are facing today, and starting first with Ukraine, and also including the decision made by the new US administration in cutting the support to Ukraine, the military support that result with those Europeans who were supporting our programs for prevention being not in a position to do so. So this is something a bit frustrating to say the least, but it is my hope that we will overcome this obstacle soon by simply investing more on preventative measures, like what I recommended recently when I met with the Political Commission of the African Union that we need, through my mandate, to drive all pertinent African Union agenda on the prevention of the crime of genocide and all the mass atrocities, but also to identify the risk indicators of the ideology of hate and to ensure also timely intervention on the continent. And for that, we need to enhance the early warning mechanisms. We need to pay more attention to early warning signs. We need to prevent escalation. We need to effectively regulate and closely monitor the misuse of media platforms and encourage member states to adopt necessary policies that would monitor the media and promote professionalism, ethical and factual reporting, and last but not least, we need to prevent the exploitation and propagation of extremist messages that incite hate crimes and genocide. And my hope is that from now with this new chairperson, I will have an opportunity to regularly brief the African Union Commission Chairperson himself and the AU organs, as may be appropriate. And I just have been informed that I have been invited to the next meeting of the Peace and Security Committee of the African Union, which is more or less the pendant of the Security Council of the United Nations.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 33:36

That's amazing, and so many opportunities to make progress and to create change, despite the, you know, kind of global challenges we're all facing right now, and the pressure that puts on on your capacity to do things and generate resources. I want to turn to the commemorations that are coming up briefly. You know, this year we're commemorating the 20th anniversary of R2P, and we're also interviewing you for Genocide Prevention and Awareness Month, which marks the genocides in Armenia, Rwanda and Cambodia, among others. You know, despite international commitments to the idea of 'never again' and R2P, the global community often falls short when early action could change the course of a crisis away from the commission of atrocities. Given your extensive international, legal and multilateral experience, what are your reflections on the global track record of preventing genocide and generally, of the development of R2P over the last 20 years?

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Adama Dieng 34:45

Well, thank you very much and thank you for reminding us that April marks Genocide Prevention and Awareness Month. But also remember an open letter on atrocity risk in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I co-signed it with someone I call the champion of R2P, who is Gareth Evans, who's also the Chairman Emeritus of the International Crisis Group. And I was saying that, had we been listened to when we sounded the alarm in April 2023 we would not have witnessed what is happening today in eastern DRC with the occupation of Goma, Bukavu, and the continuing atrocities being committed by the warring parties. Now, regarding the development and operationalization of the R2P at its 20th anniversary, I would also start by paying tribute to a man I met from day one I arrived in New York. I'm referring to the late Edward Luck. Edward Luck was the first UN Special Advisor on the Responsibility to Protect and Ed used to say that in atrocity prevention, people and governments expect the UN to demonstrate moral and political leadership, and they notice when it fails to do so. I think these words of Luck resonate so intensely today when we see what is happening in the world, and it reminds us also that the prevention of genocide and other mass atrocities is not something which is external or additional to the protection of human rights. I mean, it is rather an integral part of state obligation under existing international law. And I would say that we remember all that the Office of the Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide was established as a lesson learned. It was established as the result of the failure of the United Nations to prevent the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda perpetrated in 1994 and a genocide also during which there were Hutu moderates and Twa who were also killed because they opposed the genocide. So to me, 20 years down the road, the efforts which have been made to prevent atrocity crimes by bringing the world leaders to adopt in 2005 the World Summit Outcome Document with two important paragraphs. 138: each individual state has the responsibility to protect its population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, which is something which equals, in fact, the 2000 Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union. And then para 139: the international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and all the peaceful means in accordance with Chapter VI and VII of the Charter to help to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. One would have hoped that by 2025, 20 years after the adoption of the R2P principle, 25 years after the adoption of the principle of non-indifference in the Constitutive Act of the African Union, one would have hoped that we would no longer be witnessing the crime of genocide being committed. We would no longer be witnessing crimes against humanity, war crime and ethnic things. But, that is not the

case. We are seeing situations today in all parts of the world where crimes against humanity are being committed, war crimes are being committed, genocide. So what's wrong at the end of the day? Does it mean that these leaders, they have just adopted this provision for the sake of having good conscience after their failures in Srebrenica, their failures in Rwanda, or what is the problem? And I think that's why it is important that these anniversaries be an opportunity for an introspection by the world, by regional organization, to really renew their commitment, to see why they have been failing to protect population against these most horrendous crimes of genocide, but also the crimes against humanity and war crimes, because something need to be done. We remember, following the failure of the international community in Sri Lanka, there was a mission entrusted by Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to Charles Petrie, who is one of your former Expert Voices guests, and Charles Petrie came with a bold report. And following that, Ban Ki-Moon decided to launch a new initiative, which was right up front. We put human rights first, and we can then address other issues but human rights first, and we saw it. We saw it because in South Sudan, UNMISS opened its door to protect civilians who were facing risk, unlike what happened in Rwanda, where UNAMIR soldiers had to leave, and thanks to some soldiers, battalions from Senegal and Ghana remain to protect to the extent possible, what they could do. So Mbaye Diagne, the famous captain, Senegalese Captain, Mbaye Diagne, who was killed after having saved no less than 600 Tutsis. He paid for his life. And this was, to me, a kind of reminder of our responsibility. You know, despite the fact that he was not supposed to go out and protect those population at risk, he did so, and my friend General Dallaire will never forget. And he paid a great tribute to Captain Mbaye Diagne. And today, if you visit Dakar, the capital of Senegal, there is a statute devoted to Captain Mbaye Diagne. You go to Kigali, the same also, and they celebrate even the Captain Mbaye Diagne Day. And the UN medal was named after Mbaye Diagne at the request at the time by Prince Hussein, who was the PR of Jordan at the time in New York, and when they were sitting at the Security Council, he made that proposal. So simply to say that this is an opportunity to take stock and to see what we can do more. Of course, the R2P in its implementation, in its development, faces also lot of problem. And I remember the first R2P debate I had to moderate was in September 2012 I had to deputize the Deputy-Secretary-General, Jan Eliasson, who had to join the Secretary-General in Italy. So I moderated that debate. It was so fascinating, but at the same time we had to take stock of what happened. And I remember the following year the report of the Secretary-General, there was an important reference to the intervention in Libya, because there was a tendency to say, well, R2P is simply a tool in the hands of the Western countries against those countries which don't have enough power, and we have seen it in the case of Libya, when the NATO forces were authorized to attack Libya. So what happened within Libya itself? Until today? Libya is in a total mess. But was it enough simply to say, because of what happened in Libya, R2P is not worthy? What was required, and this was made very clear in the report of the Secretary-General, was that in the future, when the Security Council decides such use of force, they should also think about the post intervention. Had the Security Council considered the post intervention in Libya, maybe it would have been possible to limit the damages of that attack, and it would have been certainly possible to have the country being in order within a reasonable period. That has not been the case. But what is important also for me, when it comes to speak about, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the R2P, is to remind each and everyone that the Special Advisor of R2P and the Special Advisor on Prevention of Genocide, their mandate are distinct, but they are complementary. And this was made, in fact, it was even formalized, I would say, by the Secretary-General to institutionalize the collaboration of the two special advisors to maximize efficiency and resources through the establishment of a joint office. And I was very pleased, and I still have good memory of the first Special Advisor I recommended. That was Jennifer Welsh, and then the second one was Karen Smith. Both of them, we had excellent cooperation. Excellent cooperation, issuing regularly a joint statement,

even at a time, despite the fact that R2P was not, I would say, accepted, quote, unquote, by some capitals because of the reason I highlighted earlier. But still, we were determined, and I think thanks to our collective effort, we were able to achieve positive results.

 Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 48:06

Thank you for joining us for this episode of expert voices on atrocity prevention. If you enjoyed this episode, we encourage you to subscribe to the podcast on Apple podcasts, SoundCloud or Spotify, and we'd be grateful if you left us a review. For more information on the Global Center's work on R2P, mass atrocity prevention and populations at risk of mass atrocities, visit our website at www.globalr2p.org, and connect with us on Facebook, Bluesky or LinkedIn at GCR2P..