

Written submission for the Standing Group on Atrocity Crimes

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Summary of the submission:

The United Kingdom (UK) has taken important steps to champion international law, atrocity prevention and the implementation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), yet inconsistent application and selective responses to crisis situations have undermined civilian protection, increased atrocity risk factors and reinforced double standards. While the UK's establishment of internal atrocity prevention frameworks is commendable, translating the information they produce into decisive policy action remains a political choice - one that is too often deferred or neglected, limiting the effectiveness of these mechanisms. Sudan illustrates both the UK's strengths – including leadership on multilateral efforts to respond to atrocity risks and contribute to accountability efforts – and its shortcomings, including limited action on underlying drivers of conflict, like external arms support, lack of political accountability for perpetrators and absence of systematic integration of affected communities into decision-making processes. This submission highlights how strengthening atrocity prevention requires consistently enforcing international law, integration of early-warning insights into policy, and decisive diplomatic leverage to align partners and mitigate enabling factors of violence.

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¹ **About the author:**

Elisabeth Pramendorfer is an atrocity prevention expert with extensive experience in influencing senior policy makers and advocating for situations at risk of atrocity crimes, violent conflict or serious human rights violations at the United Nations (UN). She is the Geneva Director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (Global Centre), the world's leading research and advocacy organization for advancing the international norm of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) at the UN and beyond, working to prevent mass atrocity crimes – genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing – throughout the world. Since 2017, she has represented the Global Centre at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, institutionalizing and expanding the Centre's work on atrocity prevention within the wider UN human rights system. She has written and published a series of articles, book chapters, op-eds and commentaries on R2P and atrocity prevention and is regularly invited by academic institutions, NGOs, governments and other stakeholders to speak on R2P, multilateralism, human rights and related topics. She also regularly represents the Global Centre at public events, expert conferences and other high-level forums. She is a Board Member of Every Casualty Counts, a UK-based civil society organization focusing on supporting effective recording of all casualties of armed violence for conflict and crisis situations worldwide.

Is the UK Government giving effect to its international obligation to prevent international crimes, including genocide and torture, as well as other violations of peremptory norms of international law? How could this be improved?

1. The UK has long positioned itself as a champion of the rules-based international order and has taken important steps to uphold its obligations under international law. This includes sustained support for and active engagement on multilateral protection agendas and international justice mechanisms as well as strong and principled leadership on mobilizing response to atrocity crises, including at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and UN Security Council (UNSC).
2. However, in practice, the UK's approach remains inconsistent. While it has demonstrated leadership in certain contexts, it has not always applied and defended international legal standards uniformly across situations. This inconsistency – mirrored by other governments – has contributed to an atmosphere of permissiveness in which unlawful actions are tolerated rather than confronted, severely undermining the effectiveness of international law as a tool for atrocity prevention, civilian protection and a rules-based order.
3. This is taking place amidst a troubling phenomenon what might be described as a global protection crisis. The protection failures we observe – from Myanmar to Gaza, Sudan, Afghanistan or Ukraine – are not isolated to specific conflicts or regions. Rather, they reflect a gradual normalization of practices that erode the legal and moral constraints on violence. International humanitarian law (IHL), instead of consistently shielding civilians, is increasingly invoked in ways that justify their targeting. The danger is not only the immediate loss of life; it is the hollowing out of international law itself. Legal norms are reinterpreted to permit actions that would once have been clearly unlawful, signaling to perpetrators that impunity is possible when powerful actors are involved.
4. But recognizing this danger should not lead to the abandonment of international law and norms, such as the Responsibility to Protect, which are designed to safeguard populations from atrocities and uphold our collective duty to prevent. The answer is to defend these more rigorously, consistently, and credibly. IHL, international human rights law and the prohibition on the use of force are not abstract principles. They are the primary safeguards that constrain violence, shape state and non-state behaviour and provide a basis for atrocity prevention, accountability and non-recurrence. When applied consistently, they create predictability and reinforce the principle that no actor is above the law. Without such consistency, however, civilian protection is weakened and increasingly subject to political discretion.
5. Recent developments illustrate this pattern. The unlawful US military intervention in Venezuela on 3 January was widely assessed as a flagrant violation of the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force, lacking clear justification under self-defence or authorization by the UN Security Council. Yet reactions among states – including the UK – were uneven. While some actors issued strong condemnations, others responded with hesitation or avoided clear legal characterization altogether.
6. A similar pattern emerged in the context of the US-Israeli act of aggression against Iran – equally undertaken in flagrant violation of international law and the UN Charter. Despite the illegality of the US-Israeli strikes, few democratic governments, including the UK, condemned the use of force by Israel and the US in a manner consistent with their condemnations of Iran's subsequent retaliation in the early days of the conflict. Instead, states reinforced a pattern of double standards. While Iran's regional attacks, violations of international law and repression of its own population were rightly condemned, US-Israeli actions were framed as justified exceptions rather than blatant violations of the UN Charter framework that binds all states.
7. This reflects a broader pattern among member states of framing violations in ways that implicitly and explicitly confer de facto permissiveness for unlawful, unilateral actions by states viewed as partners, while condemning similar conduct by others. While the US, at the time of writing, continues to face limited consequences for its invasion of Venezuela and Iran, international condemnation – including the UK – of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was swift and unified. In the immediate aftermath of the 7 October 2023 attacks, Israel was similarly granted *carte blanche* to brazenly ignore its obligations under IHL and perpetrate wanton destruction against an already besieged population in Gaza, and the international community issued only shallow warnings as Israel perpetrated strikes on Lebanon and Syria over the past two years.

8. When international law is applied inconsistently, it undermines its deterrent effect, signals that rules are negotiable, and emboldens perpetrators, who calculate that accountability will depend on politics rather than principle. For populations at risk of atrocity crimes, this erosion translates directly into increased vulnerability. If the rules designed to protect them are not upheld consistently, then protection itself becomes contingent and unreliable. This is why insisting on the universal and consistent application of international law is a core component of effective atrocity prevention.
9. **Ensuring the consistent application of international law is therefore not simply a legal or normative concern. It is a deliberate political choice. Governments decide whether to insist on compliance or allow violations to go unchallenged. This choice has profound consequences for atrocity prevention, the maintenance of international peace and security, and the protection of civilians. If the UK is to be taken seriously as a champion and defender of the rules-based international system, it must demonstrate that its commitment to the law is not selective or rhetorical, but operational and unwavering.**
10. As a permanent member of the UNSC and a leading voice in the international system, the UK is uniquely positioned to act. To give full effect to its international obligations, it should:
 - Enforce international law consistently across all contexts, irrespective of the actors involved;
 - Articulate clear and timely legal assessments of violations of international law, including in politically sensitive situations;
 - Ensure that internal atrocity risk analyses are systematically integrated into foreign policy decision-making;
 - Use its diplomatic influence to promote greater alignment among cross-regional partners and stakeholders, encouraging more consistent and coordinated responses to violations.
11. By making these choices decisively, the UK can help reinforce the integrity of the international legal system and solidify its credibility as an effective actor in preventing atrocity crimes and protecting civilians, regardless of where atrocity crimes are occurring.

Does the UK Government have comprehensive mechanisms for real-time monitoring and assessing of early warning signs of and risk factors for atrocity crimes? If so, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the current mechanisms? How, in your opinion, could they be improved?

12. A central challenge in atrocity prevention is the failure to identify, early enough, when patterns of violence indicate the risk - or the reality - of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, or ethnic cleansing (atrocity crimes). Too often, policymakers hesitate to name warning signs for what they are: signals that violence may be genocidal, that crimes against humanity may be unfolding, or that war crimes are being committed systematically and with clear intention and purpose. This hesitation is not merely semantic; it has direct operational consequences. How a crisis is diagnosed shapes:
 - The urgency of the response;
 - The range of tools considered relevant, impactful and appropriate;
 - Whether protection measures are mobilized in time.
13. Accurate and timely diagnosis is therefore foundational for effective atrocity prevention. When the nature of violence is correctly identified, governments and institutions can better leverage diplomatic, political, financial and operational resources to enhance protection on the ground. Conversely, misdiagnosis delays action, narrows policy options, and can contribute to the escalation of violence and atrocity crimes.
14. The UK has made important strides in this area, including through its diplomatic engagement in New York and Geneva, support for multilateral early warning mechanisms and protection agendas and commitment to initiatives to ensure accountability and prevent recurrence of atrocity crimes. This commitment is further reflected in the establishment of dedicated institutional capacity at the domestic level, including the UK's cross-government atrocity prevention hub. These structures are commendable, as they signal recognition that atrocity prevention requires sustained attention, expertise, analytical capacity and coordination across government agencies, actors and

institutions. Together, they can enable systematic monitoring of emerging risks and the production of early warning analyses intended to inform policy decisions.

15. However, while early warning analyses are produced, there remain persistent gaps in translating insights into policy action. Recent reporting on Sudan, for example, illustrates the challenge: despite early warnings and risk assessments regarding catastrophic violence in Darfur, key analysis was reportedly sidelined or not updated, even as credible evidence of mass atrocities emerged in El Fasher (*note: a more detailed assessment on Sudan is provided in the following section*). At the same time, the crisis was initially framed largely as a civil war between two armed factions, and as a humanitarian crisis requiring aid delivery, rather than as a protection crisis marked by the risk of atrocity crimes against civilians. This misdiagnosis delayed a more targeted response. As internal assessments that could have prompted stronger preventive responses were discarded or downplayed, the UK's official list of recognized mass atrocities was revised to no longer include the earlier Darfur genocide. This reveals a disconnect between internal monitoring and operational decision-making, undermining the preventive potential of the very mechanisms designed to safeguard civilians and prevent atrocity crimes.
16. Another key limitation is the integration of local knowledge. Effective atrocity prevention requires not only accurate diagnosis, but also meaningful engagement with affected communities. While the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has regularly consulted local actors, insights from these consultations are not always fully incorporated into programming or policy decisions. This is particularly problematic in complex crises, such as Sudan, where violence manifests in multiple, overlapping patterns, each with distinct drivers, perpetrators, and risk factors. Different communities face different threats and require tailored protection strategies. Failure to account for these variations risks interventions that are misaligned with realities on the ground, reducing their effectiveness. This gap in both crisis framing and the inclusion of affected communities' perspectives was illustrated when the UK organized the high-level London Sudan conference in April 2025, without adequately addressing the unique and imminent threats facing civilians on the ground.
17. **Effective atrocity prevention, therefore, is not just about early warning. It is about accurate diagnosis, grounded listening, and tailoring responses to the specific patterns of violence that communities themselves are experiencing.** The UK has established important mechanisms for monitoring and assessing atrocity risks, reflecting both recognition of its international obligations and institutional expertise. Yet the full potential of these mechanisms is not realized, as early warning insights are not consistently translated into policy or action. Closing this gap would significantly enhance the UK's capacity to prevent atrocity crimes and protect vulnerable populations around the world.

In which situations related to atrocity crimes has the UK Government used its frameworks and mechanisms, and were they implemented effectively? What were the challenges encountered?

18. The UK's engagement on the protracted atrocity crisis in Sudan illustrates both the potential and the limitations of current atrocity prevention frameworks and mechanisms, particularly when early warning does not translate into timely and decisive action.
19. Highlighting the effectiveness of atrocity prevention efforts, the UK has ensured strong engagement on the crisis in Sudan at the multilateral level, in particular at the HRC. In 2023, it led on the establishment of an HRC-mandated Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) on Sudan to investigate violations and hold perpetrators accountable. In 2025, the UK also took the lead in organizing a Special Session of the HRC focused on El Fasher. Following the landmark report by the FFM released on 19 February 2025, which concluded that the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) committed crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide against non-Arab communities in and around El Fasher during their siege and takeover in late October 2024, the UK, alongside Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Norway, launched the Coalition for Atrocity Prevention and Justice in Sudan, highlighting a commendable example of translating multilateral findings into coordinated preventive action.
20. However, despite these efforts, the real test of atrocity prevention lies in whether governments – including the UK – systematically use information from mechanisms such as the FFM, as well as internal atrocity risk assessments, to ensure all policy decisions are informed by atrocity risks and

lead to meaningful action on the ground. Despite early warnings regarding the risk of catastrophic violence in Darfur, including in and around El Fasher, key internal assessments were reportedly not updated or considered during critical periods of escalation. During the prolonged siege of El Fasher, credible evidence of mass atrocities continued to emerge, yet internal analyses that could have prompted stronger preventive action were sidelined or deprioritized.

21. A second limitation was the narrowing of policy framing. Internal discussions appear to have emphasized thematic issues, such as conflict-related sexual violence and accountability initiatives, rather than explicitly addressing the broader risk of genocide and mass atrocities. While these thematic responses are essential, they cannot substitute for a comprehensive atrocity prevention strategy that addresses the full scope and trajectory of violence.
22. Moreover, the disconnect between the sidelining of internal risk assessments and the responsive weight afforded to external reporting is deeply concerning. That externally produced analyses – such as the FFM report on El Fasher – catalyzed the UK to convene a coalition of like-minded states focused on atrocity prevention and justice highlights a troubling inconsistency: why do internal assessments, generated by dedicated teams within capitals and intelligence structures and warning of imminent genocide and mass atrocities, frequently fail to precipitate substantive policy decisions or preventive measures? Ultimately, this raises fundamental questions regarding the efficacy of institutionalized atrocity prevention mechanisms when internal early-warning systems are deprioritized and meaningful action is primarily prompted by externally visible reporting.
23. Sudan also exemplifies an equally critical challenge: the consequences of a fragmented international response. Rather than facing a coherent and coordinated approach, parties to the conflict have effectively “shopped around” for support, engaging regional partners and leveraging competing interests among states. The result is a fragmented landscape in which different groups of states align with different parties to the conflict. This fragmentation has manifested across multiple levels, including splits between international and regional actors and differing positions among states within regions. It has allowed warring parties to exploit divisions, shift alliances, and sustain conflict in ways that would have been far more difficult under a unified international approach.
24. Within the UNSC, these dynamics have been acutely visible. The UK has played a constructive and principled role, consistently defending core UNSC priorities, including the protection of civilians, adherence to international law, and conflict prevention. The UK has demonstrated an ability to balance ambition with pragmatism, preserving essential language in resolutions while maintaining space for compromise. Yet the limits of collective action were starkly illustrated in November 2024, when a UK- and Sierra Leone-led draft resolution calling for a ceasefire, stronger civilian protection, and improved humanitarian access received overwhelming support but was vetoed by Russia. Despite clear evidence of escalating atrocities and near-unanimous backing, the UNSC was unable to act decisively. The implications extended beyond that moment. Momentum for further action diminished, discussions stalled, and divisions deepened even as the situation on the ground deteriorated. Simultaneously, external actors increased their involvement in the conflict, supporting different parties and further entrenching fragmentation.
25. Lastly, despite the UK’s demonstrated leadership in advancing HRC and UNSC resolutions on Sudan, it has fallen short of addressing the underlying drivers of conflict, including well-documented evidence of the United Arab Emirate’s provision of weapons and material support to parties to the conflict. The UK has yet to leverage its full diplomatic influence to confront these enabling actors or to apply sustained pressure to halt the flow of arms, leaving a critical gap between formal resolutions and the practical mitigation of factors perpetuating violence.
26. This experience underscores a broader lesson for atrocity prevention: fragmented international responses amplify risk and prolong crises. The UK – alongside its allies – can and should play a critical role in using diplomatic leverage to foster coherence, align messaging, and ensure that responses are grounded in a consistent application of international law. Without such coherence, even well-developed early warning systems, principled positions, and diplomatic initiatives risk being undermined. Sudan thus demonstrates not only the consequences of delayed action but also how inconsistency and fragmentation compound risk and perpetuate human suffering.