

# INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON GENOCIDE PREVENTION BRUSSELS, 31 MARCH - 01 APRIL 2014

*Statement by M<sup>o</sup> Bleeker, Special Envoy, head of the Task Force on Dealing with the Past and Prevention of Atrocities, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs*

Mr. Chairman,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity of contributing to this important discussion on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda (1994-2014), the upcoming commemoration of the July 1995 Srebrenica genocide, and at a crucial moment in the evolving reflection on the means to prevent and punish atrocity crimes.

It is indeed an honor for Switzerland to participate on this panel, in the presence of Mr. Adama Dieng, Special Adviser to the Secretary General on the Prevention of Genocide and Responsibility to Protect and with regards to today's discussions about "political actions, reactions and initiatives".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the very short time that I have, I would like to share some thoughts on the mechanisms of prevention and accountability for atrocity crimes based on the following working hypotheses:

1 The adoption of the Genocide Convention in 1948 marked a historical milestone on the path towards prevention and accountability and since the 2005 World Summit adoption of the concept of the Responsibility to Protect and its three foundation pillars, the international community has made historical progress: states acknowledge their primary responsibility to protect their populations. Nevertheless, let's pay attention to the fact that

- Even if the **Genocide Convention provides an important framework for accountability** after the commission of genocide, experience has shown that national and international courts have found it exceedingly difficult *in practice* to convict the suspected authors of genocide
- The "**Responsibility to protect**" **remains a work in progress** that needs further development in its operational, juridical and technical aspects
- The knowledge and experience accumulated by the "community" of practitioners and policy makers in the field of prevention of atrocities since 1948 until today is considerable. Among other things, we can highlight the development of early warning systems and a meticulous analysis of the genocidal and atrocity process and their consequences. But we have to admit that, in general, however, **this knowledge is not followed by consequent and timely political decisions to prevent these atrocities.**

2 In his 2013 report on the responsibility to protect, the UNSG elaborated the emerging notion of "atrocity crimes" in relation with genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing. This linkage represents an important step forward. An inclusive approach to prevention and punishment is both useful and necessary for the following reasons:

- It creates the basis for the development of a **holistic prevention strategy** that would become operational much earlier in the conflict cycle than as has been the case until now, where the focus has been on the late stage of genocidal intent
- It generates **synergies among the different communities** engaged in the Responsibility to Protect, Prevention of Genocide, Protection of Civilians, and Transitional Justice beyond their respective lines of action and unites them in a joint endeavor.

3 We are all familiar with the promise of “never again”. Yet, we know that *it will happen again*, unless we can come forward with a vigorous response to transform the perverse dynamics of mass atrocity.

What could be the elements of this response?

- **No society is immune from the threat of atrocities.** Atrocity crimes can happen anywhere and at any time. Prevention is thus a central task for any sovereign and responsible state.
- **Prevention is a permanent endeavor.** History teaches us that prevention has failed when violence and displacement are already taking place on a large scale. Operational plans for prevention need to be in place much before than when that happens.  
Prevention of atrocities should be understood in a way that is similar to public health prevention; it requires a permanent framework, communication, education, preparedness and preliminary political commitment, so that when a threat is detected, the whole system is ready to act in a pro-active way. Preparedness is a key word in this regard. Therefore, the atrocity prevention policies and architecture shall be designed and decided upon in moments of “good weather” and not in moments of crisis.
- **Prevention is a transversal issue.** The root causes of atrocity crimes are manifold. Preventive measures need to be part of the national agenda linked in a consistent and effective way with long-term endeavors in the fields of peace, security, and development. Specific attention shall be put in the management of diversity (political, ethnical, religious, social etc.). In moments of mounting tensions, responsive and decisive mechanisms should be already in place at the national level, supported by regional or international actors, when needed.
- **Dealing with the past is a prerequisite for prevention.** Initiatives for prevention are especially challenging in post-conflict or post-authoritarian contexts, in which there is a legacy of human rights abuse. In such cases, the principles against impunity - the so-called “Joinet-Orentlicher” principles - provide a useful framework to address past abuses and provide redress by combining initiatives in the area of truth-seeking, criminal accountability, victim compensation, and institutional reform. Concerted efforts to deal with the past can serve to address fundamental grievances and rebuild trust in public institutions. Without such efforts prevention policies will lack credibility.

Let me conclude by mentioning a very promising development, namely the recently created Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes, GAAMAC. At the initiative of Argentina, Costa Rica, Denmark, Switzerland, and Tanzania, and in cooperation with the office of the Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect, representatives of 52 UN member states gathered in San José, between March 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> 2014, for the first international meeting of the “Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes” (GAAMAC).

In their outcome document, the participants emphasized that engagement at the national level is key to the prevention of mass atrocity crimes: the crime of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. They underlined the fact that the participants felt united by the conviction that the states themselves have the primary responsibility to prevent atrocity crimes within their own territorial borders and that this is a strong signal of national ownership and political will, formulated in a spirit of complementarity with on-going global initiatives at the international level.

Regarding national architecture, participants recommended to states

- To consider **appointing focal points**, to take a systemic approach and attribute coordination function to these national focal point.
- To develop **resilient legal frameworks** resistant to short-term political volatility and compatible with regional and international norms and treaties.
- To **engage actors at multiple levels** within and across the state, including executive, parliament, judiciary, security actors, education and health providers at the local, national and regional level, and cooperate with non-state actors such as local communities, religious leaders, media, NGOs, academic and private sector.
- To **allocate resources and funding within the national budget** to support the national architecture, planning and implementation.

Participants emphasized that GAAMAC shall continue as an open and inclusive global state-led effort to further strengthen national architectures for prevention of atrocities that shall

- Seek to create an efficient, **complementary platform** for the exchange of experiences, best practices, knowledge and public policies for the prevention of mass atrocities and
- Foster **state to state peer learning and building in partnership** with existing initiatives dealing with the prevention of mass atrocities and in cooperation with non-state actors.

We strongly believe that the creation of **GAAMAC is an important step towards the consolidation of a community of commitment and engagement at national, regional and international level**. Switzerland is one of the states involved in this global effort, and we encourage any state willing to engage according to this spirit of ownership and commitment and equal partnership, to join this community. Prevention begins at home, and as recent events testify, cooperation and dialogue among states is both necessary and urgent.

Thank you.

For further information:

[www.gaamac.org](http://www.gaamac.org)

<http://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/topics/peasec/peac/confre/depast.html>