



OPENING REMARKS
by
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I would like to open this conference by inviting you to stand for a minute of silence as a sign of respect and in memory of the millions and millions of innocent victims of hatred. Men, women and children killed for the only reason of who they were.

Thank you.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a real privilege to welcome you today in Brussels to this International Conference on Genocide Prevention.

Let me address a special word of thanks to the speakers and panelists who have offered to share their in depth knowledge and experiences on the atrocious reality of genocides, a crime so terrible that seventy years ago it didn't even have a name.

Thanks to Raphael Lemkin, the crime now has a name. Genocide. A few months ago we commemorated the 65th anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, a Convention, Mr. Lemkin promoted so tirelessly.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are haunted by the stories and the images of too many mass atrocities, in particular by the unprecedented genocide of the Jews in the Holocaust, by the genocide of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina - less than two hours by plane away from here - and by the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. It is on the occasion of the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of that manmade disaster, that this conference is organized.

Over the last decades we have come a long way in the punishment of the crime of genocide. The creation of special tribunals like on Yugoslavia and for Rwanda and the International Criminal Court prove that impunity is no longer an option.

In this respect, my country, Belgium, has played a pioneering role in the prosecution, trying and punishing of crimes against humanity. Substantial work, done by the Rwanda Commission in the Belgian Senate laid the base to determine responsibilities. Belgium was one of the first countries to start prosecutions and firm sentences have been handed to those guilty of mass atrocities and crimes against humanity. The Judiciary is proceeding with new criminal cases. Condemnations for genocide are no longer impossible.

Whereas we have made substantial progress in the punishment of crimes against humanity, war crimes, I am convinced we can and we must do better on prevention of mass atrocities. Is it not a shame that we continue to see - practically daily - these horrendous scenes of torture and killings on our TV screens and in our media? The threat of a genocide was even mentioned only a few weeks ago in the Central African Republic. Don't we all have a duty to protect and promote the fundamental rights of all populations, including minorities, irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity, race or religion? Is it acceptable in the 21st century to still witness "hate speech", especially given the number of international conventions protecting human rights?

Remembrance ceremonies and memorials are very important. We owe it to the victims and their families. My visits to such places, in Kigali, Washington, Berlin and Yad Vashem, have always been very emotional. They show the worst of what mankind is capable of. They are also a central tool to raise awareness, especially among generations that have not lived through such tragedies. Education is obviously a key part of prevention. But this is not enough.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I say "we must do better", I mean all of us, civil servants, academics, legal scholars and practitioners of law and representatives of civil society. I think however that a special role falls on those of us who have been entrusted with political responsibilities. Indeed, genocide is a highly political process and therefore prevention has to be above all political.

It is never useless to repeat declarations like "Never Again". But I am sure you all agree that it is necessary to go beyond and to act. That is why I have taken the initiative of this conference.

Aware of its failings to stand up to defend people against mass atrocities - in particular in Rwanda - the World Community has launched a number of initiatives. The most visible of this was the United Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome document reaffirming each State's responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including their incitement. I am of course fully aware of many misunderstandings about the norm of Responsibility to Protect with prevention at its core. At the same time, if correctly implemented, R2P should be considered a major achievement for mankind.

It is reassuring to note that a number of networks on Responsibility to Protect and on Genocide Prevention are being established and functioning. I absolutely applaud exchanges of

information on critical situations. However, information has to be the basis for political action. The question is thus: how can we get from information on risk situations to political actions to prevent that beginning risk situations spiral into full scale mass atrocities? Can we think of the establishment of national Focal Points on Genocide Prevention, in combination with the existing or new Focal Points for Responsibility to Protect? Can these national Focal Points be linked to regional organizations and develop the capacity to inform, consult and take appropriate decisions for political preventive action, obviously in agreement with the UN Secretary General and the Security Council?

R2P and Genocide Prevention Networks remain however in my view very much focused on pre-crisis and crisis situations. More structural measures are necessary.

I am a strong believer in awareness raising actions in particular with young people on the fundamental importance of protecting human rights and the values of diversity with a special focus on the rights of minority groups. Shouldn't our educational systems pay more attention to the education on past genocides and on prevention of new atrocities and at the same time focus on promotion of human rights?

I look forward to the results of your deliberations and creative debates at tomorrow's high level political session. The objective is to draw some Chairman's conclusions at the end of the conference. I sincerely hope substantive operational points will emerge from the various sessions and be compiled and implemented. The Brussels conference should have the ambition to lead to further measures to be taken in our respective countries, in the regional organisations we are member of and of course at the United Nations.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The number and the level of the delegations represented at this two-day conference demonstrate the importance of this thematic and the necessity to put it on the political agenda.

Let's now turn this engagement into concrete deeds in order to prevent genocide – and even better to outlaw it. We owe it to the memory of those who have been victims of mass atrocities and genocides. It is our duty towards future generations.

I thank you for your participation and wish you all a productive stay in Belgium.