

Agence France-Presse
12 October 2007

Experts in Montreal say genocide is preventable

MONTREAL, Oct 12 (AFP) -- Diplomats and human rights experts said Friday that genocide is preventable if the international community responded to early warning signs and warring parties redefined their political interests.

But panelists meeting at a three-day global conference in Montreal said by the time genocide is underway, there is little the United Nations can do to stem the bloodshed.

"Once a genocide has begun, it's too late for the UN to intervene. I think it's too late," said Gregory Stanton, former US State Department official, now president of Genocide Watch.

Stanton instead called on civil society to watch for warning signs of genocide - such as demonizing one's opponent -- and put pressure on states to act.

"If we're going to develop the political will to really do something, we're going to need to build an international anti-genocide movement very much like the anti-slavery movement of the 19th century, otherwise our leaders are not going to take action. That is the problem, it's because our leaders don't take action even if they know what the early warning signs are."

Stanton was among legislators, academics and genocide survivors attending the event, which aimed to explore ways of preventing genocide. Romeo Dallaire, who led UN peacekeeping operations in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka also spoke at the conference, which was sponsored by McGill University's law faculty.

Gay McDougall, a UN advisor on minority issues, said more attention needed to be paid to countries in "pre-conflict" situations.

"By the time the killing begins, the viable options left open to the international community are extremely limited. Prevention has got to happen way before the country situation gets on the agenda of the security organs of the UN."

"We've got to have more attention and political backing to the recommendations from the human rights bodies with regards to states that are still in pre-conflict situations," McDougall added.

She also accused UN nations of ignoring the agency's own human rights body.

"I just don't think we can talk about preventing genocide if we're going to ignore the human rights organs of the UN."

Howard Wolpe, director of the Africa Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars in Washington, said states needed to be persuaded to act in their "enlightened self-interest."

"At the end of the day, if you're serious about preventing violent conflict of any sort, the fundamental challenge is to create a process and mechanism where you get people who are inside that situation to begin to redefine their self interests so that they understand their connections with others."

Alison Des Forges, a leading scholar on Rwanda, said civil war, a

climate of fear and hatred, and state organisation were all precursors of the Rwandan genocide.

"The sense of the enemy posing a direct and immediate threat allows political leaders to manipulate and focus people to act in a way that otherwise is unthinkable," she said.

Des Forges said a document quoting Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, was found in Rwandan government offices in the aftermath of the genocide.

The Goebbels' passage read: "Ordinary people who can be persuaded that their own survival is at risk will betray every moral and legal law that they have ever known."

The conference, sponsored by McGill University's law faculty, comes amid continuing atrocities against civilians in Sudan's Darfur region where at least 200,000 people have died and two million others displaced since the Sudanese government enlisted a militia to put down an ethnic minority revolt that broke out in 2003.