United Nations Press document

07.04.04

SECRETARY-GENERAL OBSERVES INTERNATIONAL DAY OF REFLECTION ON 1994 RWANDA GENOCIDE

Launches Action Plan to Prevent Genocide Involving UN System in Speech to Commission on Human Rights

Following is the speech delivered today by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the Commission on Human Rights at a special meeting to observe the International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda. The meeting was held at the Assembly Hall of the Palais des Nations. The speech was delivered after the participants observed two minutes of silence in memory of the victims of the genocide.

“It is good that we have observed those minutes of silence together.

We must never forget our collective failure to protect at least eight hundred thousand defenceless men, women and children who perished in Rwanda ten years ago.

Such crimes cannot be reversed.

Such failures cannot be repaired.

The dead cannot be brought back to life.

So what can we do?

First, we must all acknowledge our responsibility for not having done more to prevent or stop the genocide.

Neither the United Nations Secretariat, nor the Security Council, nor Member States in general, nor the international media, paid enough attention to the gathering signs of disaster. Still less did we take timely action.

When we recall such events and ask "why did no one intervene?", we should address the question not only to the United Nations, or even to its Member States. No one can claim ignorance. All who were playing any part in world affairs at that time should ask, “what more could I have done? How would I react next time – and what am I doing now to make it less likely there will be a next time?”

Perhaps more than any others, those questions have dominated my thoughts, since I became Secretary-General. If there is one legacy I would most wish to leave to my

successors, it is an Organization both better equipped to prevent genocide, and able to act decisively to stop it when prevention fails.

Many of my actions as Secretary-General have been undertaken with this in mind. But I know that my efforts are insufficient. The risk of genocide remains frighteningly real.

Therefore, as the only fitting memorial the United Nations can offer to those whom its inaction in 1994 condemned to die, and as recommended in 1999 by the Independent Inquiry into the actions of the United Nations during the genocide in Rwanda, I wish today to launch an Action Plan to Prevent Genocide, involving the whole United Nations system.

Let me summarise the plan under five headings:

First, preventing armed conflict.

Genocide almost always occurs during war. Even apparently tolerant individuals, once they engage in war, have categorized some of their fellow human beings as enemies, suspending the taboo which forbids the deliberate taking of human life. And in almost all cases they accept that civilians may also be killed or hurt, whatever efforts are made to limit so-called “collateral damage”.

Unless we are very careful, this can be the beginning of a swift descent into a different moral universe, where whole communities are designated as the enemy, and their lives held to be of no account. And from there, it is only one more step to the actual and deliberate elimination of these communities: one more step, in other words, to genocide.

So one of the best ways to reduce the chances of genocide is to address the causes of conflict.

The plan will therefore embrace, and expand, the recommendations already made in my report on Prevention of Armed Conflict, which have been endorsed by both the Security Council and the General Assembly.

We must help countries strengthen their capacity to prevent conflict, at local and national levels.

We must do more at the regional level, to prevent conflict spilling over from one country to another.

We must give greater attention to environmental problems and tensions related to competition over natural resources.

We must work together with the international financial institutions, with civil society, and with the private sector, to ensure that young people get the chance to better themselves

through education and peaceful employment, so that they are less easily recruited into predatory gangs and militias.

We must protect the rights of minorities, since they are genocide's most frequent targets.

By all these means, and more, we must attack the roots of violence and genocide: hatred, intolerance, racism, tyranny, and the dehumanising public discourse that denies whole groups of people their dignity and their rights.

I shall make a comprehensive report to the General Assembly later this year.

Second, protection of civilians in armed conflict.

Wherever we fail to prevent conflict, one of our highest priorities must be to protect civilians. The parties to conflict – not only states but also non-state actors – need to be constantly reminded of their responsibility, under international humanitarian law, to protect civilians from violence.

This has now been accepted by the Security Council, and the UN system is working on a platform of action for the protection of civilians. But translating it into concrete results will not be easy. In more and more conflicts we see that civilians, including women and children, are no longer just "caught in the crossfire". They become the direct targets of violence and rape, as war is waged against a whole society.

Wherever civilians are deliberately targeted because they belong to a particular community, we are in the presence of potential, if not actual, genocide.

We can no longer afford to be blind to this grim dynamic. Nor should we imagine that appeals to morality, or compassion, will have much effect on people who have adopted a deliberate strategy of killing and forcible expulsion.

That is why many of our United Nations peacekeepers, today, are no longer restricted to using force only in self-defence. They are also empowered to do so in defence of their mandate, and that mandate often explicitly includes the protection of local civilians threatened with imminent violence.

A current example is the Congolese province of Ituri, where ethnic conflicts clearly have the potential to escalate into genocide. Last year the situation was stabilised by the timely intervention of the European Union, authorised by the Security Council, and today UN peacekeeping forces are holding the local militias in check.

But the situation remains precarious, and it is by no means unique. The plan calls for both the Secretariat and the Security Council to keep the mandates and resources of all our peacekeeping forces under constant review, particularly with the threat of genocide in mind, and to be ready to reinforce them promptly when the need arises.

Third, ending impunity.

We have little hope of preventing genocide, or reassuring those who live in fear of its recurrence, if people who have committed this most heinous of crimes are left at large, and not held to account. It is therefore vital that we build and maintain robust judicial systems, both national and international – so that, over time, people will see there is no impunity for such crimes.

Working in parallel with a Rwandan justice system that has prosecuted many people who committed acts of genocide, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda has handed down landmark verdicts, which send a message to those who may be contemplating genocide in other countries.

It was the first international court to convict anyone for this crime; the first court of any kind to hold a former head of government responsible for genocide; the first to determine that rape was used as an act of genocide; and the first to find that journalists who incite the population to genocide are themselves guilty of that crime.

The plan calls for a review of the work of this tribunal and others, both national and international, in punishing and suppressing genocide, so that we can learn lessons for the future. It calls for special attention to countries that have experienced conflict or are at risk from it. And it calls for greater efforts to achieve wide ratification of the Rome Statute, so that the new International Criminal Court can deal effectively with crimes against humanity, whenever national courts are unable or unwilling to do so.

Fourth, early and clear warning.

One of the reasons for our failure in Rwanda was that beforehand we did not face the fact that genocide was a real possibility. And once it started, for too long we could not bring ourselves to recognise it, or call it by its name.

If we are serious about preventing or stopping genocide in future, we must not be held back by legalistic arguments about whether a particular atrocity meets the definition of genocide or not. By the time we are certain, it may often be too late to act. We must recognise the signs of approaching or possible genocide, so that we can act in time to avert it.

Here, civil society groups can play a vital role. Often it is their reports that first draw attention to an impending catastrophe – and far too often, they are ignored.

The United Nations human rights system, too, has a special responsibility. This Commission, through the work of its Special Rapporteurs, independent experts and working groups, as well as the treaty bodies and the Office of the High Commissioner, should be well placed to sound the alarm. Indeed, your Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings described many warning signs in Rwanda the year before the genocide happened. Alas, no one paid attention.

The challenge is to bring all this information together in a focused way, so as to better understand complex situations, and thus be in a position to suggest appropriate action. At present there are still conspicuous gaps in our capacity to analyse and manage the information we have. The plan seeks to correct this.

One decision I have already taken is to create a new post of Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, who will report through me to the Security Council and the General Assembly, as well as to this Commission.

This adviser's mandate will refer not only to genocide but also to mass murder and other large-scale human rights violations, such as ethnic cleansing. His or her functions will be:

First, to work closely with the High Commissioner to collect information on potential or existing situations or threats of genocide, and their links to international peace and security;

Second, to act as an early-warning mechanism to the Security Council and other parts of the UN system;

And third, to make recommendations to the Security Council on actions to be taken to prevent or halt genocide.

That brings me to the fifth and final heading of the action plan, which is the need for swift and decisive action when, despite all our efforts, we learn that genocide is happening, or about to happen.

Too often, even when there is abundant warning, we lack the political will to act.

Anyone who embarks on genocide commits a crime against humanity. Humanity must respond by taking action in its own defence. Humanity's instrument for that purpose must be the United Nations, and specifically the Security Council.

In this connection, let me say here and now that I share the grave concern expressed last week by eight independent experts appointed by this Commission at the scale of reported human rights abuses and at the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Darfur, Sudan.

Last Friday, the United Nations Emergency Relief Co-ordinator reported to the Security Council that "a sequence of deliberate actions has been observed that seem aimed at achieving a specific objective: the forcible and long-term displacement of the targeted communities, which may also be termed 'ethnic cleansing'". His assessment was based on reports from our international staff on the ground in Darfur, who have witnessed first hand what is happening there, and from my own Special Envoy for Humanitarian Affairs in Sudan, Ambassador Vraalsen who has visited Darfur.

Mr. Chairman, such reports leave me with a deep sense of foreboding. Whatever terms it uses to describe the situation, the international community cannot stand idle.

At the invitation of the Sudanese government, I propose to send a high-level team to Darfur to gain a fuller understanding of the extent and nature of this crisis, and to seek improved access to those in need of assistance and protection. It is vital that international humanitarian workers and human rights experts be given full access to the region, and to the victims, without further delay. If that is denied, the international community must be prepared to take swift and appropriate action.

By "action" in such situations I mean a continuum of steps, which may include military action. But the latter should always be seen as an extreme measure, to be used only in extreme cases.

We badly need clear guidelines on how to identify such extreme cases and how to react to them. Such guidelines would ensure that we have no excuse to ignore a real danger of genocide when it does arise. They would also provide greater clarity, and thus help to reduce the suspicion that allegations of genocide might be used as a pretext for aggression.

A serious attempt to provide such guidelines was made by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, in its report on the Responsibility to Protect. That Commission did very useful groundwork for the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, which surely cannot avoid this issue as it considers how to improve our collective security system. I earnestly hope that the Panel's recommendations will bring consensus within reach, and I urge all Member States to make a real effort to achieve it.

But let us not wait until the worst has happened, or is already happening.

Let us not wait until the only alternatives to military action are futile hand-wringing or callous indifference.

Let us, Mr. Chairman, be serious about preventing genocide.

Only so can we honour the victims whom we remember today. Only so can we save those who might be victims tomorrow".

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