

Early Detection, Decision, and Action: Developing Capacity as a Critical Element in the Prevention of Atrocities

In second half of Day 2, an interactive plenary session was conducted. The session began with a video message from **Mr. Peter Maurer** from the International Committee of the Red Cross. Mr. Maurer expressed his regrets at not being able to attend GAAMAC2 in person, but he looked forward to much-needed results towards the prevention of atrocities. He spoke about how focusing the conference on the concrete action that states can take at the national level is a pragmatic but ambitious objective. He mentioned that the ICRC in more than 150 years of experience has learned that the greatest challenge to preventing serious international crimes lies in the midst of wars. The brutality, the violence, the serious violations of international humanitarian laws committed by parties to conflicts is at the origin of the suffering of millions of people. Mitigating their effects and preventing their escalation is therefore both crucial and urgent.

He believes that governments bear primary responsibility under international and domestic law to limit risk and harm and to ensure that the basic needs of people are met. Greater efforts within each state by authorities and societies at large are therefore instrumental. He described three key aspects— respect for the law, international humanitarian law and human rights law in particular, as essential to protecting lives and dignity. Secondly, to foster an environment conducive to such respect, which may entail far-reaching changes in policies and institutional frameworks and engagements with key influencers to prevent violence and violations of the law. Thirdly, to assess and protect vulnerable people more effectively and more efficiently. The ICRC's primary presence in the midst of armed conflict aims precisely at this. Over the next three days, he expected that the plenary would discuss ideas, consider arguments and ponder the risks and opportunities of different actions. He requested that participants also include in their debates the issue of access to the most vulnerable people by neutral and impartial humanitarian organizations like the ICRC. Mr. Maurer believes that facilitating their access and presence will be one of the most important things for the people they serve so that the ICRC may do their work to prevent the worst.

Next, **Mr. Birger Heldt** made a brief presentation about early warning and early detection systems. He explained how several “generations” of warning systems were currently being used, both quantitative and qualitative, HQ based and field based. He went on to elaborate how the tools of analyses had not changed much over the last decade and how difficult it was to have data for good forecasting. Since, genocides are rare events, there was a very small amount of empirical data for learning. Moreover, the factors in play have many moving parts and are complicated to apply.

Mr. Heldt proposed viewing early warning systems in mass atrocities as we view diseases. Disease surveillance systems have small data requirements, as well as consistent application and this may be a benchmark for creating a better early detection system. This would involve:

- Identifying a baseline
- Surveillance: continuous data feeds from various sources
- Looking for anomalies: set warning levels; apply analysis tools
- Consistent analysis
- Expert assessment of the validity of alarms before action is taken

Continuing this line of thinking, he explained how a fifth generation of early warning systems could be developed with limited forensic data while learning from national/international disease control architectures.

Next **Ms. Jennifer Welsh**, Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide and Responsibility to Protect addressed the plenary via video message where she thanked the governments of the Philippines and Switzerland for organizing and GAAMAC2 as well the many states and civil society organizations that have supported this important process. She apologized for not being able to attend personally to be a part of the interesting discussions that couldn't be timelier. In her opinion, GAAMAC's core mission is turning the rhetoric in favor of prevention into greater on-the-ground commitment to making prevention the rule rather than the exception. The underinvestment by policy makers in prevention compared to the substantial investment in response can't be attributed solely to the lack of political will.

According to Ms. Welsh, there is also a lingering belief that too little is known about what actually works and this is particularly true of so-called structural prevention which is aimed at addressing deeper potential drivers of atrocity crimes. There are at least three reasons for gaps in our knowledge. Firstly, atrocity crimes are still thankfully relatively rare; they are high impact yet low probability events, making it challenging to fully substantiate arguments and claims about what preventive strategies are most effective. The second reason for our knowledge gap is the continuing tendency to equate atrocity crime prevention with the prevention of armed conflict and although there is a close connection between them, atrocity crimes can occur outside of the context of a formal armed conflict. The third and the final conceptual issue which has recently been addressed by Scott Strauss, is the lack of a cleaner method for understanding exactly why it is that some countries spiral into systematic and widespread violence while others do not.

She went on to elaborate that although the past decade has seen broad convergence on identifying macro-level risk factors of genocide and other atrocity crimes, and indeed we have a list of these risk factors in our own framework, Scott Strauss rightly points to two remaining shortcomings. First, we need a better understanding of why cases that current models are watch would predict should result in genocide and other atrocity crimes don't end up moving down that path. Even in some of the most sophisticated forecasting, the ratio between countries at risk and countries that actually experience these outcomes is greater than 30:1. So, what are the more specific dynamics that lead away from and lead toward the commission of atrocity crimes? The second shortcoming is the lack of a capacity to move beyond assessments of likelihood to anticipating when atrocity crimes will actually be committed. In other words, what particular events or developments shift a country from being at risk to such crimes actually beginning?

In her opinion, the limitations of the approaches we have can be addressed by analysts building a greater temporal dimension into their atrocity prevention framework so we can distinguish between general more structural risk factors and secondly, early signs of upheaval and mobilization that suggests increased risk of atrocity crimes for e.g. the propagation of an exclusionary ideology or the organization of armed groups. In addition to that, she believes that we need to follow Strauss' lead and pursue two more specific lines of inquiry. The first is to identify a set of inhibitors to atrocity crimes, attitudes, incentives, institutions and mechanisms that foster moderation and work against violence and we need to analyze their presence or absence across a variety of cases. Secondly, become much smarter and knowledgeable about the triggers that commonly ignite underlying risk factors to produce situations where atrocity crimes are committed or are imminent.

GAAMAC is focusing on that first line of inquiry around the inhibitors to the commission of atrocity crimes. The term inhibitor relates to certain capacities, institutions and actors that help states address the early signs of crisis. They could contribute to the development of effective, legitimate national institutions but they could also have a much more direct impact on mitigating atrocity crime risk, according to Ms. Welsh. In the 2014 report of the Secretary

General on the Responsibility to Protect, seven such inhibitors were identified. Ms. Walsh elaborated on some of them and a snapshot of her message around these is as below:

(1) Professional and accountable security sectors

Much will be discussed around this topic in GAAMAC2, so Ms. Walsh chose to focus on other inhibitors.

(2) Impartial institutions for overseeing political transitions

Impartial institutions for overseeing political transitions can be incredibly important in forestalling dynamics related to political conflict associated with elections. Those impartial bodies can stand apart from narrow economic and political interests; ensure the integrity of an election and announce the results in a timely, impartial fashion.

(3) Independent judicial and human rights institutions

Independent judicial and human rights institutions play an important role in mitigating the risk of atrocity crimes – these are mechanisms for addressing grievances that constitute an alternative to violent or extra legal strategies that might otherwise trigger atrocity crimes. Second these mechanisms provide the means of bringing those who plan, incite or commit atrocity crimes to justice. Institutions in power to protect human rights can also act as inhibitors to atrocity crimes as they can identify and make public which kind of statements constitute incitement based on ethnic and religious hatred.

(4) The capacity to assess risk and mobilize response

While each state will develop an early warning mechanism and a risk assessment framework appropriate to their own context, I think the guidance provided by the framework of analysis at our office can help to identify risks and vulnerabilities in a state's capacity to address them. Relevant facts and analysis must be provided as well in a timely and accessible way to policy makers and policy makers must be in a position to act

(5) Local capacity to resolve conflict

The existence of informal mechanisms, both local and national that can foster dialogue and reconciliation and mediate on specific matters have really made the difference. The role of traditional and religious leaders in diffusing tensions may be especially relevant and my office has designed an initiative with religious leaders on their role on preventing incitements.

(6) Media capacity to counteract prejudice and hate speech

Countering hate speech that constitutes incitement is an important inhibitor to the commission of atrocity crime as tools for the receiving and transmitting of information, the media can either provide a powerful pathway for the propaganda and negative stereotypes or serve as a key role for contesting their arguments or preventing their dissemination. So thinking about the investigative capacity of journalists, legislation regarding incitement and codes of conduct and ethical standards for journalists can all help.

(7) The capacity for effective and legitimate transitional justice.

A major risk factor for atrocity crimes is the past commission of such acts and a record of impunity, effective and legitimate transitional justice mechanisms play a key prevention role. They help to address the crimes committed, outstanding property claims but also offer durable solutions for the displaced, restore citizenship for victims, help to bring about educational reforms that promote the value of diversity and also more generally instruct on the causes and consequences of atrocity crimes.

Ms. Walsh concluded by stressing that these inhibitors are really critical elements that deserve more of our attention. In addition to risk factors, they help us build a holistic package. Prevention can only be effective, if states have the structures, means and knowledge to foster resilience. She urged the plenary to learn from each other about variations on these

inhibitors and to request and commit bilateral assistance when the need for expertise arises. Mutual assistance has had a substantial impact by helping states to create these inhibitors. She closed by expressing her hopes this meeting will result in connections leading to the provision of very concrete technical support and offering the support of her office to further these discussions.

Subsequently, **Mr. Simon Adams**, Executive Director, Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect addressed the plenary. He began by emphasizing the need for R2P, which is greater than ever before. The situation in Burundi is a prime example of when the global community can see a flashing red light. The question he posed is what does this mean and how can we take effective action?

Mr. Adams believes that progress has been made in understanding what human rights violations look like and in understanding the risk factors, triggers and threats. There is a need to understand what warnings look like. An effective tool in his opinion is publications such as the one put out by his organization aimed at diplomats and policy makers. Many other actors are coming out with publications around early warnings, the West African region has government and civil society publications.

Next he drew attention to R2P focal points – governments can appoint a senior figure looking into R2P issues nationally and at the regional level. At the moment, 51 nations have appointed an R2P focal point. There is also progress, he continued, to address past failures and problems.

He urged the plenary to consider the various tools available under international architectures, as they are severely unutilized in his opinion. Countries are hesitant to ask questions. The Peace Building Commission is an example – only one nation, Guinea voluntarily requested to be a part of this. They received support (some of it monetary) to mitigate the possibility of a coup. He closed by reiterating the importance of early warning and early response mechanisms to undermine the politics of the “machete and mass graves”.

To close the activities of Day Two, **Mr. Adama Dieng**, UN Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide addressed the plenary once again. He expressed his pleasure at seeing such a huge interest from the participants. He observed the various attempts to identify the best lessons and encouraged participants to take these back to their own countries as ideas for prevention of atrocities and enable states to protect their populations.

Mr. Dieng felt that there was real breaking of new ground as a deep understanding and bringing together of all the actors was taking place. This was a real opportunity for learning from each other. The working groups he observed showed common concerns and the desire to leave with concrete plans for the future. The entire conference demonstrated, in his opinion, how all the moving parts of this issue come together.

He stressed the importance of R2P; it has been ten years since the adoption of this principle, which is not a long time, but yet R2P has already become deeply rooted and produced a lot in the global context.

He found that the conference was already a success, and looking back may be considered a historic event – people from all over the world are sharing their concerns and trying to identify the way forward, taking the first steps and moving from theory to action. GAAMAC2 is an extraordinary opportunity to create concrete ideas and suggestions for action.

He shared with the plenary his experiences with religious scholars in Marrakesh, where he spoke to them about the uniqueness of humanity – although we come from diverse religions

and ideologies, our humanity is one. He closed the day by asking the participants to form groups and come up with a proposal with concrete ideas and benchmarks of what is needed.