Atrocity Prevention in Special Circumstances

GAAMAC 2016
Workshop III
February 3, 2016

Jennifer Leaning MD SMH
FXB Professor of the Practice of Health and Human Rights
Harvard Chan School of Public Health
Special Circumstances

• General principles and guidance on practice
  – These circumstances take place in all societies
  – All societies harbor the potential for social unrest
  – Through atrocity lens: these circumstances are trigger events that intensify risk escalation

• Common elements
  – Always Involve groups of people/crowds/large populations
  – So be aware of “crowd dynamics” “group think” and history
  – People who are afraid or angry do not handle complexity and will react out of habit—fight or flight
  – Trigger events will trigger memories, flashbacks, old grievances, old instances of atrocity
Special Circumstances—Political transitions, elections, civil demonstrations

- Civil demonstrations
  - Use of force will always escalate
    - Avoid causing a stampede—**DO NOT CROWD the CROWD**
    - Model discipline—many doctors and nurses; unarmed police (if police are not hated); discrete police armed to scan crowd for weapons
    - Do not act unless necessary
  - Political transitions, elections
    - Plan ahead—usually there is a lead-up time
    - Assume the worst
    - Mobilize the stabilizing authority figures and leaders
    - Get media on board and teach them not to incite
    - If any violence: pledge and carry out immediate fair investigation
    - For public actors: make no promises, tell no easy lies
Special Circumstances—Disasters

- Potential for atrocity comes from suppression of survival strategies of those ignored or stigmatized by planners and responders
- Pre-disaster: be alert to and try to mitigate
  - Discrimination and indifference among planners and authorities—to the vulnerable and the stigmatized
- During disaster—watch for disparities and injustices and try to intervene
  - Blatantly inadequate response or horrifying outcome will provoke fury
  - Do not send police after “looters” or people who break law to save themselves
- Post disaster—empathize with the survivors
  - Provocations include high death rate of children, visible corruption; inattention to the dead
- For public actors
  - The highest authority must show empathy
  - Then rely on trusted technical advisors to answer media questions re details
  - Convey sense of competence and cohesion in response team