

Remarks at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Forward-Looking Symposium on Genocide Prevention

Remarks

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Holocaust Memorial Museum

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Thank you very much, and it's a tremendous honor for me to be here on this occasion for such an important conference. I want to start by thanking Sara for that introduction, but much more than that, for her life's work. She's been involved with the Holocaust Memorial Museum since it was just a plan on paper. And she's been here every step of the way shepherding it to the extraordinary heights it has assumed as a learning, teaching experience for 1.7 million people every single year, the vast majority of whom are young people.

And I also want to thank Dr. James Lindsay, senior vice president of the Council on Foreign Relations, and Mr. Michael Abramowitz, the director of the Committee on Conscience here at the museum. And as a point of personal privilege, let me also thank my longtime friend Mark Penn for doing this important research, and also Dr. David Hamburg, who – I don't know if David is here, but David and I have been talking about these issues for longer than either of us care to remember, and much of his work and his thinking has been incredibly important.

Now, this gathering is yet another example of what the museum does so well. It brings us face to face with a terrible chapter in human history and it invites us to reflect on what that history tells us and how that history should guide us on our path forward. As Sara said when we were walking in this morning, human nature did not dramatically and profoundly change in 1945. We still struggle with evil and the terrible impulses and actions that all too often result in atrocities and violence and genocide. But I want to thank the Committee on Conscience for bringing attention to contemporary cases of extreme violence against civilians.

Let me begin by acknowledging that here in this museum, it's important to note that every generation produces extremist voices denying that the Holocaust ever happened. And we must remain vigilant against those deniers and against anti-Semitism, because when heads of state and religious leaders deny the Holocaust from their bully pulpits, we cannot let their lies go unanswered. When we hear Holocaust glorification and public calls to, quote, "finish the job," we need to make clear that violence, bigotry will not be tolerated. And, yes, when criticism of Israeli Government policies crosses over into demonization of Israel and Jews, we must push back.

Here at this museum and in the work that many of you do every day, we are countering hatred with truth. Thanks to the museum and institutions like it and scholars and academics and activists around the world, we have accurate histories. We have memorials and archives that record the

stories of those who survived and those who did not. And because we know what happened, our call to action is that much clearer and compelling. Bringing that dark chapter into light helps clarify and sharpen what we mean when we say “never again.”

But despite all we have learned and accomplished in the last 70 years, “never again” remains an unmet, urgent goal. At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, we have seen campaigns of harassment and violence against groups of people because of their ethnic, racial, religious, or political backgrounds, and even some which aimed at the destruction of a particular group of people, fitting the definition of genocide. The Khmer Rouge slaughtered those suspected of having a high school education or other supposed enemies. Saddam Hussein massacred Kurdish communities in northern Iraq. Entire villages in Sudan were wiped out by government-supported militias.

So in April, President Obama came to this place right here to underscore this Administration’s commitment to stopping the mass slaughter of civilians. He laid out a broad vision, declaring that fighting atrocities “must be the work of our nation and all nations.”

So today, I want to talk about our strategy for preventing and responding to these crimes and the specific steps we are taking, because we have seen the cost of inaction. In Rwanda, 800,000 people in a country of 7 million died in the 1994 genocide. I remember being in Rwanda with my husband when I was First Lady, listening to story after story from survivors about the loved ones they had lost and the horrors they had endured.

The world waited until the massacre at Srebrenica before acting in Bosnia. It took the stories of men and boys summarily executed by the hundreds in refugee camps, of women and girls dragged into fields and gang-raped by soldiers, of infants murdered because they would not stop crying. And yet we’ve also seen how decisive action can make all the difference.

Two years ago, I visited Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. When I arrived, throngs of men and women were lining the streets, clapping and waving flags and holding signs that said “Thank you America.” What the United States and our NATO allies did there more than a decade ago may not be fresh in the minds of every American, but I can assure you they certain – those memories are certainly fresh in the minds of the people of Kosovo. During that time, families lived in fear that they would be dragged from their homes, loaded onto trains and trucks to ethnically cleanse communities. If we had failed to intervene when we did, who knows how many faces would have been missing from those crowds?

So we do have a moral obligation to confront threats such as these, because they are violations of our common humanity. And as the poll you’ve just heard about shows, the American people share this commitment and believe we do have a responsibility to act. But it isn’t just the morally right thing to do. These crimes undermine stability in countries and across regions. They spark humanitarian crises and send refugees streaming across borders. They reverse economic progress and stymie growth for generations. They create bitter cycles of vengeance and retribution that can scar communities for decades.

President Obama was clear when he stated that preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest as well as a core moral responsibility. So if a government cannot or will not protect its own citizens, then the United States and likeminded partners must act. But let me hasten to say this is not code for military action. Force must remain a last resort, and in most cases, other tools will be more appropriate through diplomacy, financial sanctions, humanitarian assistance, law enforcement measures.

The Administration has acted on this commitment. When the Qadhafi regime threatened a massacre in the city of Benghazi, we forged an international coalition to stop the assault. When Laurent Gbagbo violently clung to power in Cote d'Ivoire, we worked with UN partners to prevent the killing of innocents and to pressure him to relent. Now, he is standing before the **International Criminal Court**. When the Lord's Resistance Army escalated its attacks against civilians and its brutal work of turning children into soldiers, we helped governments throughout Central Africa increase their efforts to go after the leaders, including Joseph Kony. And we continue to work with international partners to end the ongoing violence in Syria and usher in a democratic transition.

Now, why we have acted in these cases to try to stop violence, to contain events that could create even more terror may not be a hard question to answer. But the questions of exactly when and how to act are difficult. The fact is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Every situation requires a tailored and careful response. And today, I want to discuss a few specific practical steps that we are taking to combat genocide and mass atrocities, and I want to highlight two core ideas.

First, we are putting new emphasis on prevention, and second, we are seeking to expand the range of partners contributing to this cause because no one country can be effective alone. Let me start with prevention. You want to stop atrocities before they start. How do you know what to look for?

Well, genocides and mass atrocities don't just happen spontaneously. They are always planned. Genocides are preceded by organized, targeted propaganda campaigns carried out by those in power. Extremist leaders spread messages of hate often disguised as something else – a song on the radio, a nursery rhyme, or a picture book. The messages filter down. Those in power begin to dehumanize particular groups or scapegoat them for their country's problems. Hatred not only becomes acceptable; it is even encouraged. It's like stacking dry firewood before striking the match. Then there is a moment of ignition. The permission to hate becomes permission to kill.

I remember going to Bosnia shortly after the Dayton accords were signed and meeting with a group of Bosnians. And one Muslim woman told me that when the violence started, she asked a neighbor whom she knew well, "Why are you doing this to us? Why is this happening?" She said that their families had known each other for many years, they had celebrated together at weddings, they had mourned together at funerals. And her neighbor replied, "We were told that if we don't do this to you, you'll do it to us first."

The United States and our partners must act before the wood is stacked or the match is struck, because when the fire is at full blaze, our options for responding are considerably costlier and more difficult.

There are responsibilities for this effort now across our government from the intelligence community to the Defense Department to the Treasury to the State Department. And at the center of our work is our core asset, our diplomats and development experts.

First, we are making sure that our officers serving in at-risk countries are trained to understand the warning signs, to provide accurate assessments of emerging crises, to take the first mitigating steps. That might mean engaging governments and their supporters. It might mean talking to local media about growing violence. It might mean supporting those who are countering propaganda.

Second, we are putting technology to work advancing our prevention efforts. Because technology has changed the way we can detect and respond to mass atrocities. Until recently, it not only might happen, it did take days or weeks before outsiders knew about violence in a remote location. But now, a bystander with a cell phone and a YouTube account can show the whole world exactly what is happening.

So we are developing our own technological innovations. Our Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor is working on a project to detect when governments use malicious software to target protestors and then warn those being targeted. We also want to educate citizens about the risks of certain types of electronic communications and the availability of more secure alternatives. And as President Obama announced here in April, USAID is partnering with Humanity United on a tech challenge to identify new, high-tech innovations that will aid this cause.

Third, we are enhancing our civilian surge capacity. We already have personnel trained to analyze conflicts and defuse potentially violent situations. Now we will be using those personnel to focus on atrocity prevention. We have deployed our Civilian Response Corps to countries such as South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, and Kyrgyzstan. We hope to train new teams to assess conditions on the ground, work with local governments to detect signs of impending atrocities, work with the local civil society and others who are representing populations at risk, and make recommendations to American officials on what we can do to prevent conflict. The new Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations will deploy these personnel to address potential atrocities and empower citizens to learn how to resolve conflicts themselves.

Fourth, we're deploying new tools through our National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security because women are often the first to know when their communities are in danger, and they are often the first to suffer. So we're working with women at-risk in areas where they are to make sure there are early-warning systems responsive to sexual and gender-based violence. For example, we have supported a project in the DRC to build a community alert network to protect civilians, including from conflict-related sexual violence.

Fifth, we can directly pressure those who organize atrocities and cut off the resources they need to continue their violence. We can target sanctions against groups using information technology to further human rights abuses as we've done in Syria and Iran. And those responsible for such crimes will not find safe haven in our country because our government will now deny entry visas to anyone responsible for or suspected of planning or committing a mass atrocity.

Lastly, we want to deter atrocities by making clear that those who commit these crimes will be held accountable. Our work over the last three administrations to bring Milosevic and Mladic and Karadzic to justice for their crimes in the Balkans is a testament to that commitment. Our message to perpetrators must be that we do not forget, and there will be consequences.

But that brings me to the second part of our approach. We need to expand the circle of partners who can help prevent and respond to crises, because a problem of this scale takes the skills and resources of governments, the private sector, and civil society, all working together. It starts with a robust diplomatic effort. And we have to strengthen our ties and our cooperation with likeminded governments and organizations, because if more countries are looking out for warning signs and training their diplomats on prevention techniques, we will all be more responsive. I applaud the African Union for their increased attention on the crises across Africa and of ECOWAS for responding effectively to the violence from Sierra Leone to Cote d'Ivoire.

We'll also be stepping up multilateral engagement to bring a greater focus on atrocity prevention. We're working to strengthen the U.N.'s core peace and security tools. Under our leadership, the G8 Peacebuilding and Peacekeeping Experts Group is focused on training and supporting peacekeepers to better identify and respond to violence that can and all too often does evolve into atrocities. To succeed, however, peacekeeping and special political missions will require the right resources, an understanding of the situation on the ground, strong leadership and personnel, and most importantly, the political will of member nations to back up these missions. That is often the most scarce commodity.

We're expanding our connections with the private sector because companies that respect human rights foster an environment in which atrocities are less likely to occur. And when they do, the private sector must send a strong message by refusing to do business with those responsible. Banks should refuse to finance the sale or purchase of oil from such countries. Jewelers should refuse to traffic in blood diamonds. And there are numerous examples of how economic pressure can get the attention of leaders when all of the other efforts have not.

We also need to do more to support civil society. And I started the first-ever Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society around the world because we want to be in an emergency response mode with civil society groups that are standing up against violence and harassment.

We're putting our elements of this strategy – prevention and partnership – into action through the **Atrocities Prevention Board** that President Obama announced here. Now, it might not be obvious that creating yet another government board will address a problem as entrenched as this. But the fact is a body such as this can drive the kinds of institutional changes that we envision. It can help galvanize efforts across our government to focus on prevention, to ensure that all our tools and resources are being put to good use. And it will give us an organizing principle, if you

will, because it is difficult. There is so much information coming into this government on a second-by-second basis, and making sure it gets pulled together in one place where people can assess and analyze it and then suggest actions based on it is a challenge. So the board is the organizing entity that forces every part of the government to say, "This piece of information might be of use to the board. I better make sure it gets there."

I particularly want to acknowledge our Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Maria Otero, who has represented the State Department so well on this board.

Now I understand very well that as much as we are doing to try to get ahead of these terrible events, we are clear-eyed about our challenges. How do we bring along countries that are reluctant to get involved or ensure that we don't make a bad situation worse or provoke even more violence? So we have to approach this work with a large dose of humility and understanding.

But one thing must be noted: All nations have some influence and leverage that they can put to use if they are so engaged and focused. Even if nearly every country in the world takes a stand, we have seen recently how one nation or a small group of nations' obstruction can derail our efforts. That has been the challenge we have faced in the UN Security Council over our efforts in Syria.

As the Assad regime continues its bloody assault on its own people, despite crippling sanctions, condemnation, increasing political pressure, they have found support, primarily from Iran, Russia, and China. More than a hundred other nations and organizations have made clear that Assad must step aside in order for a transition to begin. And we are supporting the Syrian Justice and Accountability Center, which is compiling evidence of serious abuses and violations of human rights. We're supporting the UN Commission of Inquiry, which is gathering evidence about the crisis. We're sending a message to the Syrian regime and making clear that there will be consequences for their actions.

But I have to say that we are also increasing our efforts to assist the opposition. This is a very complicated and difficult set of circumstances on the ground, and yet we know that the sooner it ends, the less violence there will be and the less chance for extremism to take hold. But it will be unfortunate if, indeed, the Assad regime and those around them decide that it's an existential struggle for them and they will maintain and even increase the level of violent response.

We think about and worry about and work on these issues all the time. And if it were easy, we wouldn't have to do things like have Holocaust memorials or atrocity prevention boards. But we are struggling with some of the deepest and most difficult impulses of human beings to protect themselves, to obtain power, to dehumanize others in order to enhance their own position and standing. And we have to do everything we can to keep pushing forward humanity's moral response and effective efforts.

I want to close, though, by saying that not every mass killing is announced by the explosion of mortars or the exchange of gunfire or concentration camps. They aren't always cases of governments slaughtering their own people. There are slow-motion crises that develop over time

and don't capture daily headlines and are even more difficult to address, like the use of rape as a weapon of war. In the eastern Congo, it's estimated that 1,000 women and girls are raped every day, and it is a deliberate strategy used in the conflict there to dehumanize, to marginalize, to break the spirit of people. Or take the dehumanizing brutality in North Korean prison camps. They, I'm told, were joined by *Shin Dong-hyuk*, who was born in one such camp, and has made it his life's work to bring the world's attention to the conditions in his country. Or take the horrific problem of infanticide or, as it is rightly called, gendercide – families killing their own infant girls or allowing their baby and toddler daughters to die because their societies value only sons.

Now, whatever form atrocities take, however society explains, rationalizes, even tries to justify, we must be committed to preventing and ending all of these actions that truly dehumanize all of humanity. Now we have laid out our course for turning our commitment into action, but we recognize the plan we have laid out leaves many questions to answer, many ideas still to be formulated, and innovations to devise. But I am convinced we can make progress together. We have, in our lifetimes – those of us of a certain age – seen evil and hatred overcome. And in the tragic history that surrounds us here in this museum, we also see the stories of the heroes – the men and women who did the right thing, even when confronted and threatened by evil. And we're inspired. We're inspired by their courage and their resolve, what drove them to try to save a life.

That resolve continues to grow stronger. If one were to look at the great sweep of history, one has to believe that we can together overcome these challenges, that there will slowly but inexorably be progress. And at the root of that must be our resolve, and that resolve must never fail so that we can say and mean it, "never again."

Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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