

The fragility of freedom in an age of impunity

Calling for UK leadership on atrocity prevention

The freedom to live without fear of persecution and violence is a fundamental one. Yet, an age of impunity and inconsistency in the face of mass atrocities has made this a fragile freedom. As we remember those who perished in the Holocaust and all victims of mass atrocity crimes, we must transform our shared desire for a world free from such violence into resolute actions.

On Holocaust Memorial Day we reflect upon that egregious period of European history and the many atrocity crimes that have been committed across the world in the years since.

On this day, we rightly honour the Jewish, Roma, Sinti, LGBTQI+, Black, disabled and political communities who were persecuted by the Nazis and their allies. It is a day when we re-commit ourselves to building a future free from identity-based persecution, here in the UK and around the world.

The Holocaust was unique, as all atrocities are. We must, however, learn from and be attuned to the parallels of discrimination present across many modern atrocities perpetrated around the world, today.

Atrocity crimes have not been relegated to history. They are not even particularly exceptional; in fact, they are fairly frequent.

Far from living up to our commitment of ‘Never Again’, the repeated failure to confront genocide and crimes against humanity has helped usher in an age of impunity. In practically every region of the world, from Ukraine to Syria, Myanmar to Ethiopia, and Sudan to Palestine and Israel, identity-based violence against people because of who they are - their race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, political affiliation, age, disability or class - is becoming a defining feature of this political era. In 2023 alone:

- The [Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect](#) identified more than 30 countries wherein populations were at risk of, or are currently facing, mass atrocity crimes.
- In [Sudan](#), over 12,000 people have been killed, with about 5.9 million displaced within the country, making it the world’s largest internal displacement crisis.
- In [Israel](#), 1,200 people were killed and over 200 taken hostage in the October 7 Hamas attack.
- In [Gaza](#), 1.9 million – 85 per cent of the population – have been displaced, over 23,700 have been killed, and 60,000 more injured in ongoing hostilities.
- In [Syria](#), 1,032 civilians were killed during the biggest [uptick in violence](#) recorded in recent years.
- In [Myanmar](#), more than 578,000 people have been displaced since 26 October, and 363 civilians, including women, and children, killed following greater military crackdowns and violence.

Genocide and crimes against humanity are never inevitable and can often be prevented. The UK must prioritise efforts to raise the alarm, mitigate violence, hold accountable perpetrators and save lives.

As a result of growing cross-party calls across both Houses, positive change in the UK’s approach to preventing mass atrocities is gaining pace. In 2021, atrocity prevention was identified as a priority in the Integrated Review on Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, spurring the FCDO to establish a Mass Atrocity Prevention Hub with dedicated staff. This year’s International Development White Paper explicitly committed to strengthening early warning and forecasting of mass atrocity risks, a welcome commitment to prevention.

However, this new team needs consistent political leadership and resource to deliver their mandate meaningfully and effectively. Protection Approaches and the 25+ NGOs of the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group have long called on Government to move from strong words to effective action.

Since 2017 the Foreign Affairs and International Development Committees have made repeated demands for a whole-of-government approach and dedicated atrocity prevention strategy.

"Our predecessor Committees and a multitude of civil society actors have criticised the Government's approach of conflating atrocity prevention with conflict prevention. History tells us time and time again that these are distinct issues, demanding distinct approaches, each with a clear strategy. We recommend that the Government introduce a national, cross-departmental strategy for atrocity prevention."

Foreign Affairs Committee
Never Again: The UK's Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond

"Without a strategy, I am concerned about how the government will measure whether its efforts stack up and deliver real change for those at risk. I fear that, once again, individuals and communities will fall through the cracks of UK policy. They are the ones who will pay the ultimate price."

A new model requires a plan that extends to the whole of government. It requires dedicated budget lines, whether within the sanctions team, in key embassies, or within the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund. It requires mandatory training for ambassadors so that there is no chance that they are left without support in their hour of need. Most of all, this emerging model needs political leadership."

Sarah Champion MP, Chair, International Development Committee

The prevention of identity-based violence and atrocities is a collective responsibility that begins at home and extends through to our participation in the world.

No community, society or country is immune to identity-based violence. All states, governments, and policymakers have a part to play in upholding national and international commitments to prevent atrocity crimes, including improving the UK's own domestic responses to the spectrum of identity-based harms, from hate crime to violent extremism and atrocity risks. In times of political, economic or social crisis, societies become more vulnerable – with history showing the most marginalised groups often paying the greatest price.

As an organisation that works to confront and prevent identity-based violence in the UK as well as internationally, we know that when violence escalates abroad, hate crime and hate incidents rise in our own towns and cities. We are experiencing a time of immense community division as the violence in Israel and Palestine continues to escalate, with [concurrent rises of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia](#) at home.

Similarly, the rise in violence across the world against LGBTQI+ communities is reflected in the [increased levels](#) of hate crime against queer communities here in the UK. At our own front doorstep, our current asylum and immigration policies lay waste to the grave lessons the Holocaust provided on the need to provide safe routes for sanctuary and stand with those fleeing atrocities.

The responsibility to protect is therefore a collective one. Ongoing effort is required, from local grassroots groups to political leaders, to ensure that everybody's rights and freedoms are protected and respected.

"[Part of a national strategy on atrocity prevention] must be a more holistic approach to developing a resilient society ... It is about civil society strength, where cohesive, equitable communities, high in public trust and with strong, inclusive institutions, can limit and mitigate the damage from both internal and external shocks."

Fleur Anderson MP, Chair of the APPG on the Prevention of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity
75 Years of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and UN Convention on Genocide
House of Commons Debate, 7 December 2023

A chance for global British leadership: towards an Atrocity Prevention Strategy

The lessons of the Holocaust teach us that the prevention of mass atrocity crimes and identity-based violence must be consciously centred in, and deliberately integrated across, the domestic and foreign policies of all states that aspire to make the world a safer, fairer and more stable place.

The International Development Select Committee's 2022 report *From Srebrenica to a safer tomorrow: Preventing future mass atrocities around the world* provides a practical roadmap for how the UK can better respond to and prevent identity-based violence and atrocity crimes, enshrining a whole-of-government approach and dedicated strategy on mass atrocity crimes.

Since 2018 the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group has called for a national strategy on mass atrocity crimes. Protection Approaches has recommended that any such strategy have four components:

- **Prevention-first policy thinking** which seeks to stop atrocities before they occur, by disrupting and dismantling the structures that allow perpetrators to act with impunity.
- **Investing in network analysis** which monitors and evaluates the root causes of atrocities, maps the motivations of potential perpetrators, and empowers the coalitions that can help prevent atrocities.
- **Institutionalisation** that finds the balance between integration and specialisation, ensuring that atrocity prevention is neither mainstreamed nor siloed.
- **Developing resilient societies** where cohesive equitable communities, high public trust and strong inclusive institutions limit and mitigate the damage from internal and external shocks.

What can Parliamentarians do?

We therefore ask parliamentarians this Holocaust Memorial Day to call on HMG to embrace the International Development Committee's recommendations on how the UK and likeminded states can do better to prevent genocide, crimes against humanity and other mass atrocities, including by:

- Establishing a **national strategy on the prevention of mass atrocities** that integrates commitments across domestic and foreign policy
- Making a **whole-of-government commitment** to use all its tools and levers to help prevent genocide and crimes against humanity
- Creating **dedicated budget lines** to adequately resource prevention efforts across departments and teams, whether in the sanctions team, to support key Embassies, or within the Conflict Stability and Security Fund
- Ensuring all **Embassies and Posts receive atrocity prevention training** and priority countries receive specialist support, training and adequate resources