
Integrating atrocity prevention across UK policy: The need for a national strategy

Submission to the Integrated Review of International Policy
from the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group

August 2020

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Everything we have heard as part of this inquiry has strengthened our belief that an atrocity prevention strategy is now more vital than ever. The Government needs to act urgently to produce a comprehensive atrocity prevention strategy and implementation plan to ensure it moves beyond words and towards concrete actions.

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Foreign Affairs Select Committee
Global Britain: The Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention
September 2018

Organisations

This submission has been agreed by the following members of the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group:



About the Working group

The UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group, established in 2017 and coordinated by Protection Approaches, comprises over 25 UK-based NGOs, research institutions, and individual experts working in different ways to build a world where mass atrocity crimes and other forms of identity-based violence are less likely. The Group is considered an exemplar national network in the field and has been working with the UK Government, Parliament, and wider civil society to enhance British contributions to the timely and effective prediction and prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocities.

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Integrating atrocity prevention in UK international policy

This short position paper comes from members of the UK's civil society Atrocity Prevention Working Group. In it we set out, drawing upon our collective expertise and as a contribution to the ongoing Integrated Review of international policy, how the United Kingdom might build upon its rhetorical commitment to prevent atrocities, to learn the lessons of past genocides, and to uphold the collective responsibility to protect.

As we have seen from recent and ongoing events in Xinjiang province, Myanmar, Syria and other situations of grave concern around the world, preventing atrocities is not a challenge of the past but of our world's future. While all states must shoulder the burden of prevention and protection, we believe that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, as a state which aspires to global leadership, and in the interests of a secure nation, Britain can and must narrow the gaps between the commitments it has made on the global stage on this agenda and their practical implementation.

The Integrated Review and the decision to merge the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office bring significant opportunities for the further integration of this agenda across Whitehall and Britain's embassies. However, it also brings risks, as significant elements of the UK's work on atrocity prevention falls outside of these areas; for example in the fields of export licencing, education, border policy and trade. It is therefore vital that the UK take advantage of this moment to outline a national strategy of atrocity prevention.

The need for a national strategy for atrocity prevention

Mass atrocities are gross, widespread and systemic violations of human rights, often linked to identity. They can happen in conflict situations, such as in Syria and the Central African Republic, outside them, such as in North Korea and Venezuela, or in hybrid contexts such as Myanmar or Iraq where atrocities occur as a distinct phenomenon from other manifestations of political violence. Therefore, preparing for and enhancing atrocity prevention approaches requires analysis both of areas such as Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo where many risk factors for conflict and atrocity are present, but also areas such as Brazil, Egypt and Nigeria where hate speech and compromised state institutions give rise to the risks of so-called peacetime atrocities.

The primary objective of British foreign policy is to make the nation secure. A secure United Kingdom requires a secure world. Atrocity crimes, even when they take place in small and remote locations, reverberate around the world with devastating consequences for global stability and security. The UK's standing in the world is also closely linked to its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and the primary responsibility the UK therefore assumes for matters of global peace and security. Preventing atrocities is therefore a vital function for any British government.

The overlap between conflict prevention and atrocity prevention is substantial but not total. Mass atrocities are commonly grounded in a long history of grievances, discrimination, and tension but can be set off by events that change these dynamics for the worse. Conflict prevention can often help prevent atrocities but sometimes, as in Syria, Rakhine or Xinjiang, different tools are needed. In working to strengthen UK contributions towards the prevention of mass atrocities as a distinct - although overlapping - priority, we are not seeking to displace or challenge British conflict prevention efforts. Rather, we are asking the Government to address and clarify where gaps do exist, where conflict prevention is not sufficient, and where more could realistically be done to protect lives.

In recent years significant momentum has gathered around the idea of outlining a national atrocity prevention strategy with ministers, civil servants in various government departments, parliamentarians and parliamentary select committees, and civil society helping to advance the proposal. This process grew from the period of self-reflection following the UK's failure to respond to the Rohingya Crisis – a consequence of a failure to take a proactive approach to the risks of atrocity crimes – and was documented by Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC)¹ and International Development Committee (IDC)² reports on the matter and a second inquiry by the FAC³ on the subject of the Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention. Subsequently the FCO produced a guidance note which named Lord Ahmad as the minister with responsibility for atrocity prevention, and brought welcome clarity with regard to the approaches and departments responsible for atrocity prevention work.⁴ In a speech for Policy Exchange shortly afterwards then Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt further promised to “do more within existing budgets”⁵ on atrocity prevention – Policy Exchange themselves then recommended the UK “develop a new cross-government Atrocity Prevention Strategy”⁶. During the 2019 general election all major parliamentary parties voiced support for the atrocity prevention agenda.⁷

Core principles of an integrated national strategy for atrocity prevention

The Atrocity Prevention working group would like to thank and congratulate the government on their work advancing this agenda thus far, and to suggest they build on these foundations by developing an atrocity prevention strategy. This would help recognise, communicate, and when necessary respond to risks of identity-based violence and mass atrocities.

An atrocity prevention strategy should provide a framework to draw from, and integrate the workings of, all parts of Government whose work can contribute to decreasing the likelihood of atrocities. Such a strategy can and should be a useful tool for UK civil servants: it should neither duplicate existing work in areas such as the Protection of Civilians (PoC) or Conflict Prevention. Instead it should provide a framework, and ideally inform the development of an institutional architecture or working methodology, which will enable more focussed and effective work in the new FCDO, in embassies, and across Whitehall for the purpose of preventing atrocities.

Such a strategy could have three core interweaving strands:

Communication

Recent experiences in Myanmar, DRC, and Central African Republic have illustrated the extent to which Government would benefit from establishing a clear internal communications protocol setting out how to monitor imminent warning signs, triggering moments, indicators and risk factors; when and how to raise the alarm – both across government and externally – and guidance on escalation

Analysis

An atrocity prevention analysis mechanism would facilitate intelligence collection and collation, analysis, and sharing of appropriate information. It would receive early warning from the communication strand and assess risks and threats of identity-based violence, including mass atrocities on that basis. This in turn would initiate a process of information sharing to relevant Government bodies and authorities in order to allow those departments to conduct a risk assessment of their exposure to the possibility of complicity. The analysis strand would also undertake scenario planning, engage allies and partners, and develop the capacity to deploy civilian advisors to situations of concern.

Institutionalisation

‘Establishing an atrocity prevention “seat” at the policy-making table’ will help maximise and coordinate contributions towards effective prediction and prevention across Government.⁸ Whether This coordinating function could take the form of a cross-cutting prevention analysis unit or a resourced office of the focal point for Responsibility to Protect. In addition atrocity prevention has to be consciously integrated into the job descriptions and job titles of all those responsible for UK atrocity prevention policy.

Atrocity crimes represent humanity at its worst, preventing them requires global leadership at its best. This is a calling to which the UK should aspire.

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