Preventing mass atrocities
An agenda for policymakers and citizens
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Introduction ........................................ 1
Early warning ....................................... 3
  Detecting risk and promoting action
Diplomacy............................................ 5
  The first line of prevention
Development aid..................................... 7
  Building resilient societies to prevent atrocities
Security assistance................................. 9
  Helping countries protect their people
International action............................... 11
  Working together to prevent atrocities

Cover: After the atrocities in Rwanda, the world said “never again.” To drive home that point—and the responsibility that governments have to protect civilians against future mass killings—activists built a mock graveyard outside UN headquarters in New York. Visiting it are genocide survivors Grace Mukagabiro from Rwanda and Kemal Pervanic, from Bosnia. Fred Askew / Oxfam
Introduction

The number of civilians living under constant threat of armed conflict and massive human rights abuse is stunning. The Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, has lost eight percent of its people to conflict and the deadly hunger and disease it has unleashed. If the US lost a similar proportion of civilians, 25 million people, approximately the population of Texas, would have died. Though that kind of staggering death rate is rare, similarly horrific stories of mass murder, rape, and displacement are told by men and women from Sri Lanka to Sudan and beyond every day.

Most people believe that mass atrocities and genocide have no place in a civilized world and must be prevented. In addition to violating our global conscience, such horrors most often occur in the context of violent conflicts that also fuel regional and international instability, undermine democracy and human rights, and create vacuums of insecurity where transnational threats can fester. The ease of transportation and spread of dangerous technology have made it clear that no country is immune to the insecurity and threats that come from conflicts thousands of miles away.

It is not enough for governments and the world community to agree that genocide and mass atrocities must not happen. Policymakers must be convinced that preventing mass violence is both possible and in their own political interests. Preventing mass atrocities in any given country can be a long process that may not lead to quick results. If a story about refugees fleeing violence is not on the front page of newspapers or websites, policymakers quickly lose interest. Only after a tragedy unfolds do leaders return to the promise of “never again.” And by then, it is often too late to stop mass violence from breaking out. Although the administration of President Barack Obama and Congress have taken some steps toward preventing genocide and mass atrocities in global hot spots, current US policy and government bureaucracy leave the most powerful nation in the world ill-equipped for the task.

What can the US do?

People across the US know that something must be done. But what can they urge government to do that will turn the rhetoric of “never again” into action? This series of short policy briefs from a group of like-minded organizations is intended to answer those questions. Our organizations come from different perspectives: We are peace advocates, development experts, humanitarian relief specialists, and anti-genocide campaigners. But we all agree that the US can, and must, do better at preventing human suffering caused by mass violence.

The US should start by declaring that the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities is a national priority. Only then will policymakers across the government take the risks and make the investments that commitment requires. The wars in Darfur and Afghanistan have shown us that political will is not enough to stop violence and prevent atrocities; it must be coupled with capable institutions, wise prioritization, and international cooperation. Good intentions are meaningless if the right strategies and tools are not also in place.

Years of underinvestment in civilian tools like diplomacy and development, along with the prioritization of narrow interests over the human rights of others, have crippled the US government’s ability to help prevent atrocities around the globe. When a country is at risk of mass violence the US should be
able to quickly develop and implement strategies for addressing it before the killing begins. This means building an effective mass atrocities early warning system, investing development dollars in programs that tackle the root causes of conflict, facilitating negotiations between adversaries, and/or engaging with regional and international partners in preventive peacekeeping initiatives.

This series of policy briefs spells out some of the actions that US policymakers should take to create the tools government needs to help prevent genocide and massive human rights abuses. Specifically, the briefs argue that the US should take the following steps:

1. Improve the ability of government agencies to detect potential atrocities and take effective preventive action.
2. Rebuild the US diplomatic corps, with particular attention to strengthening its ability to prevent atrocities and deadly conflict.
3. Improve the methods of delivering development assistance aimed at building peace and preventing violence.
4. Use security assistance to train security forces to protect civilians while keeping weapons out of the hands of abusers.
5. Strengthen multilateral peacekeeping operations to make them more effective at protecting civilians and reducing violence.

Now is the time for citizens to call on their elected representatives to make these improvements.
Early warning and why it’s important

For the US to help prevent genocide and mass atrocities, decision makers need early warning. They need regular and up-to-date information about global hot spots that will allow them to understand the nuances of each situation, develop appropriate preventive policies, and take steps to forestall disaster.

The sooner the US spots red flags, the greater its options will be for addressing the challenges they signal before violence erupts. When policymakers fail to recognize the early stages of a crisis, choices not only become more limited, but in many cases more costly and politically difficult to implement. While early warning alone can’t stop mass atrocities, without it the US cannot hope to prevent them.

Core elements of effective early warning

First, intelligence analysts must scan the globe to identify hot spots where there is a high risk of genocide or mass atrocities. Armed conflict, state-led discrimination, and a history of mass violence are all factors in that risk.

Analysts can then focus on this watch list and undertake more detailed monitoring and analysis to better understand the dynamics of each country on the list.

Finally, this information must be conveyed to policymakers in a way that will encourage and facilitate action to prevent atrocities.

Watch lists

The US National Intelligence Council (NIC) currently issues two relevant watch lists. The Atrocities Watchlist (AWL) comes out quarterly and provides a brief systematic analysis of known risk factors for atrocities, coupled with qualitative judgments by regional experts. The AWL identifies countries and situations, classifies them by levels of concern, and provides additional information on the current dynamics and potential for the situation to change. Twice a year, the NIC also issues the Internal Instability Watchlist, which focuses on political crisis and conflict more broadly. These lists are generally considered useful, yet the early warning system can be...
strengthened further by making warning and prevention of mass atrocities a priority across the government and by linking warning to action by policymakers.

**Strengthening the early warning system**

Congress and the Obama administration should take the following actions to improve the ability of the US to detect and act on early warnings:

- **Make early warning a priority for the intelligence community and Foreign Service.**

  Watch lists maintained by agencies within the US government (such as those mentioned above) and by nongovernmental groups are useful in identifying countries at high risk for the outbreak of atrocities. But it remains challenging to generate timely and accurate warnings when situations are complex and rapidly evolving. To ensure that adequate government resources are dedicated to reporting and assessment, the president and leaders in the intelligence community should make early warning of mass atrocities a priority. In 2010, the director of national intelligence took an important first step when he included a new category related to risks of mass killing in his annual testimony before Congress: threats to US national security.

  Additionally, it is imperative that US civilian personnel stationed abroad receive training to recognize factors that might lead to mass atrocities or genocide. This will help Foreign Service officers and intelligence personnel better analyze information, spot warning signs, and bring those details to the attention of decision makers in a timely manner.

- **Identify and tackle third-party enablers.**

  Genocide and mass atrocities are organized crimes. Their perpetrators need money, weapons, transportation, and other resources to commit systematic violence against civilians. Identifying patterns that hint at the threat of atrocities—including the build-up of arms and spikes in revenue to armed groups—can provide an early warning and should trigger preventive action.

  Third-party “enablers”—countries, commercial enterprises, or individuals providing resources, goods and services—play a key role in these crimes. By increasing intelligence attention on enablers, policymakers can get a more complete picture of the dynamics on the ground and of the supply chains that fuel these crises. This opens a wider range of options for preventive action, including intercepting the illegal flow of weapons and using sanctions to block the support of third-party actors. Choking off access to money, weapons, and other support can deter or interrupt plans for violence.

- **Turn information into action.**

  Once analysts have flagged troubling circumstances, that information should activate a policy review and a timely discussion of options among relevant government agencies. The review should include deeper analysis of the evolving dynamics of the situation and its potential perpetrators and their enablers, as well as an assessment of the policy options available to the US. Creating a mandatory trigger—information of a certain severity leads to a policy discussion—can help ensure that the US government treats warnings seriously and can prompt it to take action.

- **Expand international cooperation.**

  The US cannot satisfy the need for early warning by itself, nor should it seek to. But it can be an effective leader in promoting genocide prevention by helping international and regional institutions become more successful themselves at detecting early warnings.

  Expanding information-sharing with other governments and institutions can help the US monitor high-risk situations. By supporting the development of early warning efforts at the UN and in other international and regional institutions, the US can also promote preventive action among a range of partners and ensure that the global community shares the responsibility for preventing genocide and mass atrocities.
Preventing and ending wars, averting mass atrocities, and protecting civilians from violence requires political engagement and skilled diplomacy. Seasoned diplomats in the right places at the right times can help mediate a brewing conflict, negotiate a safe haven for civilians, or push forward a faltering peace process. A well-trained and broadly deployed diplomatic corps is essential for detecting early warnings and taking early action that can help prevent violence from erupting or escalating into widespread killing.

Unfortunately, the US lacks such a corps. The US diplomatic corps is under-resourced and poorly deployed for addressing global problems. In 2008, nearly one quarter of all diplomatic posts were vacant, and the average US embassy had only 79 percent of its authorized posts filled. The massive staffing required for the US presence in Iraq and Afghanistan has left the State Department struggling to fill US embassies in other areas of the world where violence against civilians is rampant.

This crisis in US diplomacy is no surprise. Annual funding provided by Congress to the State Department fell by 20 percent from 1994 to 2000, drastically reducing the ability of the US to engage diplomatically in a rapidly changing and interconnected world. Despite some recent steps to rebuild the US diplomatic corps, the State Department is still unable to offer the same pay and benefit scales for the Foreign Service as other government agencies. Training for the diplomatic corps is also lagging, leaving US officials without adequate skills in conflict prevention, resolution, and recovery. Embassies remain largely focused on reporting and representation instead of proactively implementing US foreign policy.

In the meantime, US foreign policy and relations with other states have become increasingly militarized, with soldiers and generals filling in where diplomats are unavailable. The Pentagon has more musicians in its military bands than the State Department has diplomats.
Consensus for the diplomatic corps

Fortunately, a bipartisan consensus is emerging in support of rebuilding the diplomatic corps and strengthening its ability to prevent atrocities and deadly violence. Under the administration of former President George W. Bush, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice launched the “transformational diplomacy” initiative, calling for increased funding and more strategic deployment of the diplomatic corps. The Obama administration has continued to request support for more robust diplomacy, including funds for an additional one thousand Foreign Service officers per year. And Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has made strengthening US diplomatic capacity a key theme during her tenure.

In 2009, the State Department launched a major review to consider the structural changes needed to rebuild and reposition US diplomacy for the future. A key component will be improving US ability to help prevent, resolve, and rebuild after deadly violence. This includes the development of a trained and deployable cadre of civilian experts—the Civilian Response Corps—whose job is to help prevent and respond to conflicts and global instability in places like Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, and Sudan.

Preventive diplomacy

The US should take the following steps to rebuild a diplomatic corps capable of spotting crises and settling disputes before they erupt into violence:

• Prioritize diplomatic resources. The Obama administration should make the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities a national security priority, and dedicate diplomatic personnel and resources to it.

• Expand the diplomatic corps. The administration and Congress should fund and continue expanding the diplomatic corps to meet today’s global challenges. The current imbalance between military and civilian personnel—a ratio of 210 soldiers in active service to every 1 diplomat employed by the US government—is ill-suited to effective global engagement. A first step is to appropriate funds to fully staff US embassies and increase the number of Foreign Service officers in global hot spots, such as East and Central Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. An adequate staffing level should allow officers to attend skills trainings without leaving their embassies understaffed.

• Improve training. The US needs to provide better training, incentives, and support for Foreign Service officers and State Department personnel. Training in conflict prevention and resolution, early warning, mediation, negotiation, and post-conflict recovery should be required for advancement to senior diplomatic posts.

Behind most conflicts, including situations that could unravel into genocide and mass atrocities, is a political problem that will ultimately require political solutions. A well-trained, well-resourced, and readily available diplomatic corps is the first line of prevention—and the best chance we have of making the slogan “never again” a global reality.
With commitment and financial support, US foreign assistance can be a powerful tool for helping countries protect their people and promote long-term peace and development. Unfortunately, years of underinvestment, the prioritization of short-term interests, and a maze of overlapping authorities and programs have left US foreign assistance in disarray. As a result, the US is unable to leverage its assistance to help prevent and respond to crises which could unravel into mass violence.

According to the US Agency for International Development (USAID), violent conflict and instability affect almost 60 percent of the countries in which USAID operates. Yet, US foreign assistance programs are not well organized to address that reality or to mitigate the threat of mass atrocities or genocide. For too long, critics have portrayed US foreign assistance simply as charity to poorer countries. In fact, by working to alleviate poverty and fostering peaceful and stable societies abroad, foreign aid can strengthen US security and advance US interests. Effective development aid can help prevent violent conflict and reduce the risk of mass atrocities by:

- Strengthening weak, unstable, or conflict-prone countries that are not able to protect their citizens or provide critical state functions.
- Supporting programs that help reduce tensions between groups and contribute to long-term peacebuilding in societies at risk of, or recovering from, violence or mass atrocities.
- Empowering local civil society and reducing the appeal of violent extremists in states that fuel violence against civilians and threaten global security.

Providing assistance to help states develop peacefully and prevent violence is also a smart investment and costs significantly less than complex military operations after a crisis emerges. Research shows that reacting to crises can cost 60 times more than preventing them.

Small increases and specific changes in US foreign assistance could go a long way in helping to defuse crises and advance peace. Those changes include improving the effectiveness of aid by allowing programs to be more flexible and comprehensive and ensuring that some resources are dedicated specifically to peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

Above: Wimalawathie Sutbasingha is a coir worker in Sri Lanka, where the 2004 tsunami badly affected people in her industry. Coir, the fiber from the husk of a coconut, is used to make rope and mats. David Levene / Oxfam
Core peacebuilding principles for US foreign assistance

To maximize its ability to prevent atrocities, US foreign assistance must be:

**Locally owned:** The sustainability of programs funded by foreign assistance rests on the degree to which local people feel the initiatives belong to them and support their dignity. Local civil society organizations must work to ensure their governments act on behalf of everyone’s best interests and not just the interests of a few. At its best, aid strengthens public accountability and supports citizens’ efforts to hold governments accountable.

**Coordinated and comprehensive:** Providing foreign assistance is not just a task for the US. Sustainable development and peacebuilding require coordination among a broad range of participants, including the UN, regional organizations, national governments in crisis regions, and international and local civil society leaders. This comprehensive approach also needs good communication supported by rigorous joint analysis, consensus building, planning, and evaluation.

**Flexible:** An important first step in any crisis prevention or response mission is to ensure that the necessary funds to support it can be released and disbursed rapidly. Speed and flexibility are essential to the mission’s success.

**Conflict-sensitive:** Development aid is vital in helping people build healthy communities and institutions that can manage conflicts without resorting to violence. But if programs are not designed to take into account the social tensions or potential conflicts within a society, the aid can undermine peace and become part of the problem. Aid programs should include conflict analyses and be designed, as best as possible, to strengthen local peace building efforts.

Recommendations

A number of US foreign policy recommendations stand out:

1. The US should commit to strengthening citizen ownership of development to ensure that citizen participation in development is deep and transformative, not cosmetic. The best hope for people at risk of atrocities lies in their own capacity to require accountability and performance from their governments. Development assistance in countries at risk of atrocities should help build this capacity by putting communities in the lead.

2. Congress should pass legislation to permanently authorize the Complex Crisis Fund (CCF)—a new fund that provides much-needed, flexible support for the State Department and USAID “to prevent and respond to emerging or unforeseen crises.” In 2009, Congress allocated $50 million for the CCF, but the fund has not yet been established permanently in law.

3. The administration and Congress should more effectively integrate conflict sensitivity into US development aid policies and programs. Conflict sensitivity should be made a higher priority across all USAID programming in countries in, or at risk of, conflict. USAID personnel should be provided funding and incentives to undertake training in conflict-sensitive development programming and evaluation. In addition, the State Department, the Defense Department, and other agencies involved in foreign assistance should be required to keep conflict sensitivity in mind when they design and evaluate their aid programs in countries in conflict or at risk of it.

With the right resources and programs, development assistance can be a critical tool for helping build responsible states that can protect and meet the needs of their people, reducing the risk of future genocide and atrocities.
When states fail to live up to their responsibility to protect civilians from violence and abuse, atrocities can soon follow. Many countries recovering from conflict or suffering from weak governments would like to prevent that horror, but have failed to build effective justice systems or capable military and police forces that can provide the security people need. In places like Afghanistan, Chad, and southern Sudan, the lack of effective and accountable state security creates a vacuum often filled by armed groups and a steady flow of weapons. The ensuing breakdown of law and order can make it almost impossible for governments to keep people safe, exposing millions to the possibility of attack.

Security assistance
Helping countries protect their people

When governments want to protect people but lack the ability to do so, the international community should step in and help. The term “security assistance” refers to any support that countries provide to other nations to help them develop, bolster, or reform their national security systems, including police and military forces and civilian justice institutions. Help can include direct foreign aid, transfers of equipment, or technical assistance.

For countries with the political will to prevent mass atrocities, security assistance is essential to help them protect their people. But it can be a tricky tool to use: Training and arming security services in countries with a history of human rights abuses and no will for reform can lead to further abuse rather than protection. In such cases, the US should withhold assistance and instead work with others to stop the flow of arms into those regions.

Training accountable security forces to protect civilians and keeping weapons out of the hands of abusers should be seen as core aspects of any atrocity-prevention policy. While many governments effectively control weapons leaving their countries, an equal amount do not. Unscrupulous arms dealers are experts at exploiting the lack of global regulations on the arms-trade and supply weapons to anyone who will pay. The development of an arms trade treaty regulating the flow of weapons based on accepted principles of international humanitarian and human rights law is essential to any effort to prevent arms from being used for atrocities.
Shifts in security assistance

If security assistance is to become a valuable tool in preventing atrocities and protecting civilians, it must include these factors:

• Be contingent on a country’s record on human rights, international humanitarian law, and sustainable development.
• Reinforce the protection of human rights and the safety of civilians, including women and children.
• Incorporate principles of good governance and civilian control of the security sector, including accountability, transparency, and oversight.

On paper, the US has incorporated these best practices, and its policy includes provisions that place limits on assistance to human rights abusers. But in reality, the US adherence to these principles is not strict.

Since September 2001, a shift has occurred: We are now steering responsibility for security assistance away from civilian agencies and directing it to the military, along with significant increases in funds. This shift is most noticeable in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the Department of Defense has taken on roles usually associated with the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), including police, judicial, and corrections-assistance programs.

Putting the Defense Department in charge of military and police reform has meant an emphasis on counter-insurgency and counter-terror operations, not on civilian protection. For example, while Iraqi army units trained by the US military have become increasingly professional, the civilian police remain corrupt, divided along sectarian lines, and involved with paramilitary death squads.

Part of the problem is that the State Department and USAID do not have enough experts to send overseas. Additionally, a legislative ban dating back to Vietnam-era abuses prohibits USAID from working on most police-related activities. And unlike the military, where soldiers cannot refuse deployment, civilian police experts are under no obligation to work in dangerous locations, making recruitment difficult.

Looking ahead

What can the Obama administration and Congress do to bolster security assistance in such a way as to prevent mass atrocities and genocide?

1. Congress should revise the goals of US security assistance to include a primary focus on helping states protect people from violence.

2. Congress should repeal legal restrictions on USAID’s participation in police training. The training needs to emphasize good governance, the rule of law, community-oriented policing, respect for human rights, and the accountability of police to citizens.

3. The administration should support the development of a robust arms trade treaty at the UN that focuses on human rights and humanitarian law as the basis for regulating the global arms trade.

Case Study: Democratic Republic of Congo

Years of war have left the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with very weak government institutions, including those that should be protecting the country’s people. For the Congolese, the consequences have been devastating.

Since 1998, more than five million people have died in cycles of violence, most of them from lack of access to food and health care. As a weapon of war, rape has become rampant and has now permeated community life.

“The national army and police have very limited capacities and there is a culture of impunity and ongoing human rights violations across all armed groups, including the military,” says a recent budget document prepared by the Obama administration. Reforming these institutions is vital if the DRC is going to overcome its history of civilian abuse and provide true security for people.

Yet without addressing the weapons flowing into Congo, building accountable security forces will only do so much. The arms and ammunition that have sustained years of brutality are overwhelmingly of foreign manufacture. The most widely used weapons are derivatives of the Kalashnikov AK-47, and in the country’s eastern provinces, researchers have identified weapons made in Bulgaria, China, Egypt, Romania, Russia, and Serbia. The consistent flow of guns makes controlling violence in the country extremely difficult. A former UN commander there described the challenge as “mopping the floor when the tap was open. One moment you disarm a group, and then a week later the same group has fresh arms and ammunition.”
Preventing genocide requires a global effort: Countries, international groups, and nongovernmental organizations all have a role to play in defusing potentially catastrophic situations.

Increasingly, the international community has looked to the UN and its peacekeeping operations to prevent or halt mass violence. In the last 10 years, the number of missions has tripled as UN peacekeeping has proved to be a versatile tool for addressing conflicts and humanitarian crises. The “Human Security Report 2005,” a major international study on peace and war, noted that global security had improved dramatically between 1988 and 2001, with the number of genocides and political mass murders plummeting by 80 percent. The study attributed this decline to an increase in conflict prevention, peacemaking, and rebuilding countries after conflict, especially by the UN and its peacekeeping missions.

UN peacekeepers face challenges

However, genocide and mass atrocities still occur. A series of crises in the 1990s—in Bosnia (Srebrenica), Rwanda, and Sierra Leone—made it clear to the world that ordinary people remain the target of unspeakable violence. Since then, the demand for peacekeeping operations has risen substantially, and trends suggest that it will continue to climb.

In recent years, the UN Security Council has sought to improve peacekeeping operations by increasing their focus on protecting civilians. But UN peacekeepers need support to carry that work out effectively. The UN routinely struggles to cobble together funding, sufficient troops, civilian staffers, and the vehicles and equipment they need. More training and support in planning their missions would allow peacekeepers to improve their ability to protect people.

To ensure that the job gets done—that whole populations won’t face the horrors of genocide—UN member states need to provide peacekeeping missions with the resources they require. And the US, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is a central player in this imperative.

Above: Young girls return from school inside Zam Zam camp for internally displaced people in North Darfur, Sudan. UN Photo / Stuart Price
What the US can do

The US can take a number of steps to provide needed support, including:

- **Provide sufficient and timely funding.**

  The US has supported UN peacekeeping initiatives for 60 years, a responsibility it shares with 191 other UN members. Countries other than the US provide more than 100,000 peacekeeping troops and cover almost 75 percent of mission costs. These missions promote America’s interests by disbanding fighters, facilitating humanitarian efforts, and creating conditions for political reconciliation. And they are cost-effective: According to the US Government Accountability Office, UN peacekeeping missions are one eighth the expense of fielding a comparative US force.

  But the US is not meeting its financial obligations for these missions in a timely manner—and that can dangerously slow the UN’s ability to respond to a crisis. The Obama administration and Congress have recently seen to it that the US has caught up on its back dues, but a policy of deferring payments for nine months and capping

- **Offer equipment and training.**

  Peacekeeping operations, which depend in part on voluntary contributions, often don’t have the resources they need. This is especially true in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan, where their size, lack of roads, and insecurity make it extremely difficult to reach people. For example, the missions in Chad, Darfur, and DRC together are struggling with a shortage of more than 50 helicopters.

  The US can offer more direct support to these missions through its Global Peace Operations Initiative. Training peacekeepers on civilian protection and providing them with tools they need would allow them to respond more effectively.

- **Strengthen the UN’s ability to protect civilians.**

  The UN is developing guidelines and improving its planning so peacekeeping forces can better protect people from violence. To ensure civilian protection is a robust part of future operations, the US should assist UN efforts by supporting training and guidance development and by ensuring that police and other actors—who can be trained by the US—have a role.

- **Enhance regional organizations.**

  In addition to helping strengthen the UN’s peacekeeping efforts, the US should offer similar help to international partners who want to prevent mass atrocities. Organizations such as the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Economic Community of West African States, and NATO may have more legitimacy to intervene in certain countries or regions. The US should help them with guidance and training on the protection of civilians.
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