

International Symposium on Preventing Genocide and Mass Atrocities

Remarks by Samantha Power, Special Assistant to the President for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, 15 November 2010

*The symposium, held in Paris, was convened by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris to assess and strategize on the capacity of governments to respond to mass atrocities. The symposium was opened with an address by Samantha Power, Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs at the U.S. National Security Council. Three focused panels examined core issues in genocide prevention, including the latest policy initiatives on both sides of the Atlantic, current threats of mass atrocities, and prospects for greater international cooperation. See the agenda [here](#)*

(...) What, concretely, should we – we governments, we advocates, we historians, we educators, we museum curators, we citizens, we NGOs – what should we be doing – and what should be doing differently -- in order to further reduce the likelihood of crimes that shock the conscience (...)

(...) First, we governments must make fresh, strategic commitments. A fresh strategic commitment is not the same as saying “never again.” It is not the same as joining consensus at the 2005 UN Summit along with the other UN member states on behalf of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). It is also not the same as voting for a Security Council resolution that includes a reference to R2P. All of these steps are worthwhile (...)

(...) In his National Security Strategy released earlier this year President Obama made clear that our effort to responsibly end the war in Iraq and defeat al-Qa’ida in Afghanistan must be matched with a vigorous commitment to prevent mass atrocities. His National Security Strategy included the most detailed summation of the US government’s approach to mass atrocity that an American President has given to date. The National Security Strategy may not be a document that everyone in Paris is reading, but it is a document that is widely read in Washington, and the President’s discussion of atrocity and genocide prevention sends a critical message around town and to officials throughout our government. It also sent an important

message around the world – mass atrocities can't just become priorities for remembrance in their aftermath. Signals must be sent prospectively in order for resources to be allocated and political will to be mobilized and harnessed.

Second, we governments must organize ourselves in keeping with our stated priorities (...) In March this year President Obama took the unprecedented step of creating the first-ever NSC position with responsibility for coordinating and supporting the Administration's policies on preventing, identifying, and responding to mass atrocities and genocide. He filled it with one of the most able public servants we could find, a lawyer who had served in the Clinton and Obama Administrations in different roles, and one who more importantly had lived and worked in Rwanda and Sudan. As many of you know, in order to keep fighting and be effective on this range of difficult issues, the commitment often has to be personal (...) It is important to have individuals focused on ensuring that the President doesn't look back on his presidency and wonder why he wasn't informed or presented with decisions. Structure and organization increase the likelihood that options will be properly presented. In short, governments can improve their ownership and responsiveness to mass killing, but it requires a level of governmental organization that matches the methodical organization characteristic of mass-killings.

Third, and very related, governments must work to systematize "prevention." (...) There is no reason we shouldn't have systems in place designed to routinize our response to indicators of mass atrocities. The structure and organization I have described makes it much easier to ensure early engagement on these issues. Working with our regional colleagues at the NSC, we now regularly convene a wide range of departments and agencies for discussions on how to prevent violence in some of the most difficult and challenging places in the world. We take advantage of what we know about when ethnic violence and atrocities take place – we are extra vigilant in the run up to and aftermath of elections and referenda, and of course in the wake of coups or other severe political or economic shocks. These "whole of government" meetings focus on prevention, and they drive the development of plans and responses, separate from day-to-day bilateral policymaking (...)

(...) My fourth and final point is that it is extremely unlikely that even the modest steps I have described would have been taken if not for the advent of the modern anti-genocide movement, comprised of students, religious groups, and citizens from across the United States. The kernel of this movement appeared for the first time around Bosnia, but it didn't activate for Rwanda. However, because of Darfur, which reached its peak killing period around the ten year anniversary of Rwanda, the movement has been broadened and institutionalized (...) The truth is that the cause that brings us together today must become politicized (...) It is the citizen and Congressional pressure on Sudan that brought this issue to the immediate attention of a freshman Senator from Illinois and convinced him to visit the refugee camps in Chad on his first trip as a Senator to Africa. And it is President Obama's knowledge of the issue that has led him to assert day-to-day leadership on Sudan in the run-up to the January 9 referendum. Grass root and grass tops pressure works (...)

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