

Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada

Address by Minister Baird to the International Conference on the Prevention of Genocide

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Check Against Delivery

On a stone wall at the memorial site of the Dachau concentration camp, a promise is written in five languages: “Never Again.”

The atrocities of the Holocaust betrayed the fundamental value of human dignity.

In April, as we commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide and gather to mark Yom HaShoah, let us renew our own commitment to fighting genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

We must be vigilant and never allow such horrific crimes to be forgotten or repeated.

That is why, in Canada, April 7 is designated as the National Day of Reflection on the Prevention of Genocide.

Canada has not been untouched by genocide.

We have been profoundly shaped by around 40,000 Holocaust survivors who resettled across Canada after World War II.

In 2011, we were the first country to sign the Ottawa Protocol on Combatting Anti-Semitism.

Over the last year, Canada has chaired the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

As chair, Canada has raised Holocaust awareness.

We have supported the fight against anti-Semitism and the old hatred’s newest form of anti-Zionism.

We have also welcomed refugees fleeing genocides and crimes against humanity in other parts of the world: Cambodia, Rwanda and Srebrenica.

These Canadians have contributed to our resolve to prevent genocide.

Persecution on the basis of religion violates fundamental human rights and raises the risk that mass atrocities will occur.

In many countries, there is an urgent need for action in defending freedom of religion or belief.

We must act, because religious freedom—freedom of conscience—is not a theological issue; it is a human rights issue, and its violation is often a prelude to violence and even genocide.

The Government of Canada has made this issue a priority with the creation of an Office of Religious Freedom.

There is much more we can all do.

States have a solemn duty to defend the vulnerable, challenge aggressors, protect human rights and promote human dignity, both at home and abroad.

This duty begins with prevention.

Prevention strategies need to be tailored to national contexts.

But one thing is clear: societies that respect diversity, protect religious communities, protect human rights and hold perpetrators legally accountable are much less likely to suffer atrocities.

Too often, our efforts at prevention have been inadequate, and the resolve of the international community has been found lacking.

Atrocities happening in the world right now—in North Korea, Syria and the Central African Republic—are stark reminders of that.

In North Korea, millions of people have suffered for decades under a totalitarian dictatorship that has outlasted the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge.

The scale, gravity and grotesque nature of human rights violations in North Korea are unparalleled in the contemporary world.

The recent commission of inquiry documented this very clearly:

Intergenerational punishment, forced abortions, indefinite holding of political prisoners, slave labour and execution of converts to Christianity.

To quote the great statesman William Wilberforce: “You may choose to look the other way but you can never again say that you did not know.”

Those who block action should bear in mind the judgment of history.

There must be accountability for the crimes by the rogue regime in Pyongyang against its own people.

In Syria, the Assad regime’s callous disregard for human life must be stopped.

The protection of the people of Syria must remain a priority.

Canada has joined in the international effort to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles. And we have committed more than \$630 million in humanitarian, development and security assistance to the crisis in Syria and the region.

Canada is also extremely concerned about the situation in the Central African Republic, where people are being targeted and attacked based on their religion.

The international community must remain engaged to prevent any further deterioration in this situation.

Prevention. Action. Accountability.

That’s what we need if we are going to make “Never Again” a statement of fact, not just of aspiration.

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I would like to thank Belgium for organizing this important conference and for bringing international attention to the fight against genocide.

And on this solemn occasion, I would like to finish by extending my condolences on behalf of Canadians to all the survivors of genocide, and to honour the countless innocent people who lost their lives or remain missing.

As leaders, this is our time.

Let us not look back when it’s too late, and wonder if we really did enough.

Thank you.