

**Remarks to International Conference on the Prevention of Genocides**  
**April 1, 2014**  
**Brussels**

Let me first introduce myself. I am Stephen Pomper, and I am the senior director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights on the staff of the U.S. National Security Council. My team and I advise White House leadership on issues relating to the protection of civilians and the prevention of mass atrocities—the latter being an issue that President Obama has described as a “core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States.” I recognize that this is a room full of people who share similar commitments—as well as an awareness that the prevention of atrocities is not an effort that any single government or organization can realistically hope to achieve on its own. It is an effort that requires all of us to be working together, constantly reviewing and sharpening our capabilities, and focusing our resolve. So with that in mind, I very much want to thank the Kingdom of Belgium for convening us here today to share perspectives and ideas—and for giving the United States an opportunity to share our own sense of the progress the international community has made with respect to the prevention of mass atrocities; the challenges we still face; and some of the opportunities we have to work together to meet those challenges.

In measuring progress, let me start with the failure of tragic proportions that is at the forefront of this community’s mind as we enter April 2014. As has already been much observed, two decades ago, after ripening for long months, the horror of the Rwandan genocide finally burst into motion. The shock of that catastrophe – the images of the hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children who died at the hands of their government and their neighbors—continues to haunt us. And we are haunted not just by what happened, but by the international community’s unwillingness and inability to engage. Roughly five decades after the Holocaust, and two decades after the Cambodian killing fields, the international community was stymied—lacking both a clear articulation of what its responsibilities were when the machinery of mass slaughter was engaged, and the political will to face those responsibilities.

In the world that we continue to inhabit—where barrel bombs rain on Syrian cities and civilians continue to cluster for protection at UN compounds in South Sudan—no one can credibly claim that we have yet met the challenge that the world failed to meet in Rwanda. But I would submit that we have made progress. We are learning and adapting. And we are, in fact saving lives. The major benchmarks of progress will be familiar to all in this room: Five years after Rwanda, an international coalition refused to look away from the atrocities in Kosovo, and intervened to stop a humanitarian disaster. In 2005, the UN General Assembly World Summit articulated our collective responsibilities to protect civilians from the worst crimes known to humanity. In 2011, the UN Security Council acknowledged these responsibilities when it authorized operations to protect civilians under imminent threat of attack in Libya and a coalition rose to the moment. And there of course are myriad other ways in which we are demonstrating our collective sense of responsibility and acting on them:

- **For example, we have become better at anticipating flashpoints and marshaling our prevention efforts to address them.** Look at Kenya where, seeking to avoid a repeat of the violence that occurred in 2007 and 2008, a broad group of governmental and non-

governmental actors worked with Kenyan public and private partners on a range of efforts—including support for civic education programs, media professionalization training, and the development of community warning networks—that set the scene for a far more peaceful transition in 2013.

- **Where atrocities have occurred, we increasingly recognize the importance of accountability tools.** Identifying and restraining individual bad actors helps communities to reconcile and move on, and can deter future perpetrators from following their footsteps. We have seen the Special Court for Sierra Leone convict former President Charles Taylor—the first former head of state to be convicted by an international tribunal since World War II--and we have seen warlord Bosco Ntaganda brought before the International Criminal Court to face justice. And from Libya to Syria to Cote d'Ivoire to South Sudan to North Korea to the Central African Republic, we are seeing international Commissions of Inquiry vested with responsibility for surfacing facts and evidence that can provide the foundation for accountability and reconciliation—and for the peace and stability that the people of these countries deserve.
- **Moreover, while the U.N. Security Council's performance remains uneven—and we have been among its most pointed critics when it comes to the Council's inadequate response to Syria—it has made an increasing priority of civilian protection.** In recent years, we have seen the Council impose sanctions on those who have committed human rights violations and abuses in Cote d'Ivoire, and speak out against amnesty for atrocity crimes in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And just in the last year, faced with worsening threats to civilians in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, the international community reacted not by withdrawing peacekeepers, as happened in Rwanda, but by reinforcing them and better preparing them to protect civilians.
- **We have also seen the U.N. Secretariat elevate its own engagement on atrocity prevention.** Senior UN officials regularly bring troubling situations to our collective attention through their travel, their rigorous reporting and monitoring, and their public outreach. In the case of the Central African Republic, the Secretary-General has led the way in calling attention to the crisis, and calling on us to prevent it from getting worse.
- **And on the home front, many of us have seen our domestic constituencies for prevention grow larger and more vocal,** reinforcing our political will to act, and putting atrocity issues and at-risk countries at the front of our foreign policy agenda.

But while this progress is real, we have to acknowledge—as President Obama did in a speech at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum two years ago—that for all of our efforts, and for everything that we have learned, we cannot expect that our work will ever truly be done. There will be conflicts that are not easily resolved. There will be senseless deaths that aren't prevented. We read about situations every day—about a Syrian regime that uses starvation as a method of warfare, about aerial bombings of civilian population centers in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States, about the Rohingya minority that has been brutally attacked and driven from its homes in Rakhine State, Burma—that make very clear the magnitude of the challenge we continue to face. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the risk of mass atrocities is likely, if

anything, to increase in the coming years. We can all see the risk factors: Continuing conflicts that spill over borders and feed instability; new technology and tools for social mobilization that for all their good effects can and likely will sharpen ethnic, sectarian and ideological divisions; the continuing effects of a difficult economic period that stresses fragile states and undermines the international community's ability to assist them; and the persistence, despite efforts to promote justice and accountability, of impunity for too many perpetrators.

This is a sober backdrop for our conversation today, but not one that should deter us. I want to recall President Obama's words last year to the General Assembly, when he urged the international community not to accept the notion "that the world is powerless in the face of a Rwanda or Srebrenica," and called on us to "get better -- all of us -- at the policies that prevent the breakdown of basic order." This emphasis on prevention has got to be our focus. For I think we can all agree that early action—before a crisis has reached full flame—is the best way to avail ourselves of the widest range, most effective, and least costly of options to stave off atrocities. In this connection, let me offer three thoughts about steps that all governments should be able to take in order to advance our collective agenda of preventing mass atrocities. Some of you may have heard us discuss these before, but they bear repetition:

First, we can prioritize atrocity prevention at the national level. At its most basic, this means making it clear to ourselves and our partners that we have a national interest in preventing the slaughter of civilians—even when it happens in countries that we have not traditionally treated as of core strategic importance. When our leaders make priority statements like President Obama did in identifying the prevention of mass atrocities as a core interest and responsibility, this sends a critical signal both to the international community and to our own institutions of government. It eliminates the need to have a threshold conversation about why we even have an interest in a given country when the threat of an atrocity is gathering there. It means we can act more quickly and effectively to save lives.

Second, we can take steps to organize ourselves around the concept of prevention. At President Obama's direction, we took the findings and recommendations of a high-level bipartisan commission and we sought to inject them into the policy and practice of the U.S. government. We've asked our embassies and our analysts to prioritize the hard work of identifying early indicators of violence. We've formed a high-level interagency policy committee—the Atrocities Prevention Board—that meets monthly to scan the horizon for atrocity threats and to help chart a course for how to address them. And we continue to work to develop new tools and capabilities for this purpose. Better organization does not substitute for political will, but we have already seen that it puts us in a better position to catalyze the kind of action needed to get ahead of dangerous situations.

Finally, we can multilateralize our efforts. No single country has the reach or resources to bear the burden of atrocity prevention by itself. We must work together. Of course, the United Nations remains essential to these efforts on several levels. Where peacekeeping missions are the main bulwark against the occurrence of mass atrocities, we need them to have the mandates, support, and capabilities to be effective. We need to support the Secretary-General and his emissaries, including the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Mr. Adama Dieng, as they sound the alarm bells, and work with them as they use their good offices and deploy

mediators to prevent conflict. In this connection, we commend the Secretary-General's Rights Up Front plan, which reflects a bold commitment to changing the way the UN system works when faced with a human rights crisis.

Beyond the UN, the efforts of regional bodies are becoming more crucial. We have worked to support the African Union in particular, which has become an essential actor in preventing violence and protecting civilians – whether by deploying a peacekeeping force to stabilize the Central African Republic, coordinating a multi-national effort to demobilize the Lord's Resistance Army, or standing up an Extraordinary African Chambers to end impunity for certain crimes committed in Chad. If we are to continue making progress toward fulfilling our commitments to prevention, we will need to support the capacity of regional bodies to do this kind of work.

And in our bilateral relations and in informal multilateral venues, we need to help keep each other attuned to early warnings of mass violence. These indicators are often more subtle than overt hate speech – they can involve shrinking political space, the passage of legislation that targets vulnerable minorities such as LGBT individuals, or growing curbs on civil society groups that provide a check and balance on government repression – but they are indicators that require our vigilance.

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Having shared with you these suggestions, let me close with this: Confronting the challenge of mass atrocities requires reflection, humility, and conviction: We have to reflect on the past in order to learn from it and gird ourselves for the struggles that lie ahead. We need humility to recognize that for all our efforts, there will be evils that we fail to cure, and that this does not mean we should abandon work that has the potential to save thousands of lives. Finally, we need conviction to stay the course: To share perspectives and expertise in conversations like this one, to perfect our tools, to remember the fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters who have lost their lives in senseless mass killings, and to better deliver on the promise of prevention. We have much to do together, and I look forward to our collaborative efforts. Thank you.