

"New Challenges. Climate Change, Social Justice and Genocide Prevention in the 21st Century"

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Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,
When I mentioned to the organisers that I was working on Climate Change and Genocide and the challenges this poses to prevention, they asked me to share some of my thoughts with you. Necessarily this needs to be somewhat generalising, given the limits on time on the one hand and the exploratory nature of the research area on the other. I therefore would like to draw your attention to the next issue (2014/2) of the International Journal of Human Rights on "Climate Change and Genocide", which I edited, and which will be out shortly. There you will find both more data and also references.

I should add here, that I am a historian by training, a historian of Africa and of European colonialism to be precise, but see myself as a historian working on the future, here the future of genocide and the future of prevention. I strongly believe that our way to see prevention needs to be augmented, to be widened in order to become sustainable. Sustainable prevention is here the key phrase.

My starting point (in history) was the realisation that quite a number of historical cases of genocide, particularly those taking place in a colonial setting, were linked to resources, or rather the real or perceived lack thereof. In contrast to traditional genocide scholarship, which understands genocide primarily as an ideological crime, caused by irrational hatred against ethnic and other minorities, I also understand genocide as an environmental crime. That does not deny the importance of ideology, but decentres it somewhat. The decision to genocide is in this understanding perceived by the genocidaires as a 'solution' to a real or imagined problem. This "problem" is most often one of resource scarcity or resource distribution, the offered "solution" is the expulsion or mass murder of human beings.

To avoid any misunderstanding: This so called "solution" is immoral and cannot be tolerated. It is completely unacceptable and violates each and every human right. It is absolutely nihilistic. Yet, if we want to understand the mind-set of the genocidaires we have to try to understand how they perceive the world, and more importantly how they legitimise their behaviour. History teaches us, that collective violence on such an unimaginable scale as genocide is always legitimised by "the greater good" of the perpetrator society, by its perceived rationality. One could call this the rational choice theory of genocide. Most importantly it means that with an increase in situations of crises, the likelihood of resorting to genocidal violence will also increase.

So what will be the greatest triggers of crises for humankind in this century? Undoubtedly climate change comes to mind, which in its core is a crisis of resources: A crisis of resources of sufficient rainfall and clean water and of habitable land. Climate change however is only one factor of what I have elsewhere termed environmental violence. I think this

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term is better suited because the term Climate Change, as least in its general use, has acquired a surplus of meaning that goes beyond the actual physical phenomenon or the set of physical phenomena originally subsumed under the term. Climate Change has become a chiffré for man-made environmental change and its potentially catastrophic effects, including the carbon economy and population growth, i.e. the finiteness of resources.

If we accept that there is a link between resources and genocide then we have to accept that in light of climate change and its consequences the likelihood of genocide in the 21st century will increase. Is the prevention orthodoxy prepared for this? No, I would say. Obviously, theories of genocide prevention based on an understanding of genocide as a purely ideological crime and resting on theoretical models with various stages to identify potential genocidal hotspots are inadequate. And so are ideas of prevention still following a control paradigm – seeing instances of genocide as limited, distinct events that can be controlled by international ‘police action’. Military intervention in particular does not seem an appropriate tool to achieve sustainable prevention. If genocidal crisis erupt in greater numbers - which might be an effect of the stress caused by environmental change on individual societies as well as the global system in its entirety - the international community will simply not be able to cope through sanctions and military interventions. Furthermore, there is a limit to the scale, intensity, and duration of military force that can be deployed before the intended consequences (stopping violence) are outweighed by adverse effects, such as becoming partisan in the conflict, fuelling anti-Western sentiments, inflicting casualties on innocents, and suffering casualties, which makes support at home for the mission crumble. And thirdly, containing the conflicts in the regions of their outbreak might prove increasingly difficult. Violence tends to spread to neighbouring countries, be it as the result of strategies of escalation or in the form of refugees. With presumably ever larger regions being affected more and more people will try to reach the lesser affected regions, many of them in the global North. Refugee streams on a large scale cannot be stopped forever by the richer nations of the Global North without undermining the moral foundations of their actions, if preventing refugees from reaching the wealthy states of “the West” is, indeed, morally justifiable at all. And fourthly and finally interventions, even under the banner of genocide prevention, are always open to the possibility of abuse by the powers carrying them out. The history of European colonialism is full of interventions under the guise of a humanitarian cause. And how does one distinguish between the legitimate and necessary protection of minorities from the illegitimate?

What is required is sustainable prevention based on a 'Global Social Justice Approach'. By that, I mean an integral approach to the problem of genocide that accepts the social dimension of the issue. Rudolph Joseph Rummel has argued that liberal democracies are less prone to commit genocidal actions than other states. Putting aside the question whether this statement comes at the expense of ignoring settler colonial violence, which was partly set well within emerging democratic structures, there is yet another way to read the historical evidence: liberal democracies are, historically, rather wealthy and stable societies. In analogy to Rummel, we could conclude that richer societies are less prone to genocidal violence than poorer ones or, phrased differently, societies in crisis are more prone to resort to genocidal violence than others. A Social Justice Approach therefore understands global social and economic inequality as a major root cause for violence, since the latter destabilizes social communities and increases the likelihood of war over resources, of intra-societal fights

for wealth distribution, and of an export of violence through refugees, to name just a few examples.

If we accept, however, extreme social inequality and social tensions as one of the root causes of genocide, effectively addressing global social injustice would be a means – if perhaps the most promising one – of preventing genocide. That would mean taking on a serious social problem of almost unimaginable proportions, one that cannot be solved by sending a few soldiers to fight a proxy war against genocide on behalf of the saturated majority at home. And it would mean that in contrast to lobbying for regime change 'over there' in the Global South, we would also have to fight for changes in the economic consumer system 'over here' in the Global North; all the more so in the light of climate change, because global injustice will be getting worse under the pressure of climate change.

Thank you very much for your attention.