

Reject genocide deniers and war criminals

Prevention of genocide and other atrocities must be brought to the community level

By Zipporah Musau



Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide.

Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu was appointed the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide about a year ago. Since then, she has traversed several continents in her efforts to help prevent genocides. As the world commemorates 28 years since the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, Africa Renewal's Zipporah Musau caught up with Ms. Nderitu for an interview. Here are excerpts:

What exactly is the role of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide?

First, thank you for inviting me to this interview, especially now because April is a very special month for my Office. On 7 April we commemorate *Kwibuka* – to remember the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

It is also a special day for us because my office was created on 7 April 2004, the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi.

This Office was created with a mandate to advance the prevention of genocide. My specific role is to act as a mechanism of early warning. I analyze information and assess risks, based on my office's ***Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes, a Tool for Prevention***

(<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/office-methodology.shtml>). I assess the risks of genocide, from looking at serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, of ethnic and racial origin that, if not prevented or halted, might lead to genocide. In specific circumstances where information is limited or not available, I undertake field missions to consolidate analysis in understanding of specific situations of concern. I then make recommendations to the UN Secretary-General and through him the UN Security Council of any potential situations that could result in genocide.

At the same time, I also liaise within the UN system on prevention initiatives and capacity building where required, as well as provide technical assistance to Member States and regional organizations on genocide prevention initiatives.

So, in other words, I do everything that I possibly can when I have the information, to prevent genocide from happening.

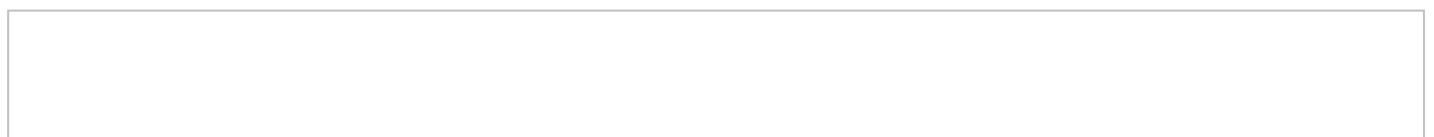
Hate speech

The United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech

(<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/hate-speech-strategy.shtml>) represents the commitment of the UN to address and counter hate speech globally. It introduces a working definition of hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other forms”. This is not a legal definition but aims at facilitating policy and programming in and outside the United Nations.

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech includes 13 specific commitments for the UN to address and counter hate speech in an holistic way (including by: tackling the root causes - which may include intolerance and hatred along identity lines; keeping hate speech from escalating, online and offline, into incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence; protecting the victims; and enhancing partnership with relevant actors) and in line with international human right standards, in particular with freedom of opinion and expression.

As Focal Point for the implementation of the Strategy, my Office provides support to UN entities and Member States to develop context-specific hate speech strategies. There is recognition that hate speech has always been a precursor to genocide - from Rwanda to Bosnia Herzegovina, to the Holocaust. In Rwanda, it was the dehumanization of the Tutsi as cockroaches, during the Holocaust it was the dehumanization of Jews as a cancer that needed to be removed. This is why it is so important that people must be reminded of what hate speech can do.



The UN strategy addresses these conditions of hate speech, through a situation analysis of among others, political and social developments and outlines relevant legal frameworks.

How do you certify a situation as genocide?

I'm often asked whether I can certify a situation as a genocide. My answer is that I do not investigate, conduct human rights monitoring, or legally qualify situations either ongoing or from the past as genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity.

What I do is to make assessments as to whether there is a risk of genocide occurring in a particular situation, with the objective of preventing or halting those crimes in case they are suspected to be already occurring.

So what constitutes a genocide in today's world?

Genocide is drawn from the framing of the 1948 **Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide** (<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide-convention.shtml>). The word “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer who lobbied for this Convention to be in place. The Convention was adopted in 1948. And as we speak, right now, more than 150 countries are party to this Convention.

The Convention defines what constitutes a genocide and confirms that genocide, whether committed in times of peace or in times of war, is a crime under international law.

In the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, *genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:*

- Killing members of the group.
- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group.
- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.
- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group.
- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

What are the possible risk factors?

In terms of possible causes, the risk factors that I spoke about earlier that we analyze include behavior, circumstances or elements that create an environment conducive to the commission of genocide. For instance, risk factors for genocide includes inter-group tensions; patterns of discrimination against some groups; or signs of an intent to destroy in whole or in part, a protected group. This can be broken down to discriminatory, segregation, exclusionary practices towards any ethnic, national, racial or religious group, or even legislation against that group.

Risk factors also include for example, a denial of the existence of any group. A history of atrocity crimes, by which I mean genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, committed with impunity against some groups is also a risk factor.

Other risk factors include tensions in terms of access to resources from the State, socio-economic disparities, participation in decision making processes, or when you notice that there are tensions around some types of groups such as political, social, or cultural, that could then develop on national, ethnic, racial or religious lines. An absence of national mechanisms or initiatives to deal with identity-based conflict, may mean you have a society that has risk factors of genocide.

The red flags for genocide would be ethnically, nationally, racially, or religiously motivated attacks or profiling of some people, because this really does constitute a dangerous trajectory that heightens the risk of genocide. And when you notice that populations are not protected equally, then that's a red flag. When you notice human rights violations, breakdown of legal systems or violation of international humanitarian law, or when you see specific targeting of groups, then you know, that these are red flags.

Are there examples of that happening currently?

I would say that there are several situations of concern around minorities, indigenous people and people of African descent being targeted in some contexts.

We have very specific ethnic clashes. And of course, we are frequently speaking to Member States, engaging UN mechanisms and working in this context to create buffers and to enhance prevention.

What numbers are we talking about for it to qualify as genocide?

It doesn't matter. It's really not about numbers. When we get into numbers, then we begin to complicate issues because for example, in Bosnia Herzegovina, over 8,000 people were killed. In Rwanda, a million people were killed within three months, and in the Holocaust, six million people lost their lives. If you go to the Kigali Genocide Memorial, as you walk out there is a plaque at the door with an inscription: "Often, people think about genocide in terms of numbers". People are waiting to hear one million people have died. What they don't realize is that it's six people dying here, three there, 20 others tomorrow, the day after another five and so on. All these numbers add up, such that one day, you will have the one million people you're looking for on your hands. So long as those conditions, which can lead to genocide exist, we should be very careful. Those initial three or 12 deaths could just be the beginning of a genocide.

It has been 76 years of the UN, why haven't we seen the end to these atrocities and genocide? What are the challenges in fighting this vice?

We often forget that efforts to prevent genocide only go back to the creation of the UN, when even the word 'genocide' was created and then became law as part of the 1948 Convention. The world came together after World War II and the devastation of the Holocaust, with a common commitment to protect future generations from the risk of genocide and came up with that convention.

What we forget oftentimes is that there hasn't always been interest in preventing genocides. Wars were common - World War I, World War II, there was also the 100 years' war in Europe, there were also wars in Asia, Africa - there have been wars since time immemorial, with communities trying to decimate each other. It wasn't until the end of World II that the world said enough! We're going to work on ending this.

It is therefore a challenge to stop something in 76 years that has been going on for centuries - since the beginning of the world.

What are the challenges?

The challenge is that we still don't have a critical mass of people willing to build bridges, to build relationships, willing to say that we're not going to have war anymore.

Also, we have very poor methods of ensuring that the willing buyer-willing seller business of weapons is either managed or brought to a stop.

How can we get out of these challenges?

We need more and not less engagement. This means working with community-based organisations, civil society, Member States, and regional organizations and international organizations.

Are there any hot spots currently?

Many years of mediating armed conflict, sometimes in very dangerous places before I joined the UN, have taught me that hot spots are issues, not geographical spaces. I would say that if you know any geographical space that has ethnic violence, human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, looting of property, mass executions, arbitrary arrests, killings, rape, displacement of populations, destruction of property, hate speech, stigmatization, ethnic profiling, and the absence of the rule of law - then that is a hotspot.

This year marks 28 years since the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, where nearly a million people were killed in less than three months. What lessons can countries learn from this experience? And what can be done to prevent this from happening in the future?

We must have a culture of independent and impartial investigations into allegations of violations and abuses of human rights. We need to do better to ensure accountability for serious violations committed so as not to perpetuate that environment that exposes the civilian populations to a higher risk of atrocity crimes.

When hate speech begins, people may initially see it as harmless, but it doesn't always end up as so. We need to understand that hate speech is the foundation for genocide.

There shouldn't be tolerance for hate speech and ethnic stereotyping. When hate speech begins, people may initially see it as harmless, but it doesn't always end up as so. We need to understand that hate speech is the foundation for genocide. To perpetuate the genocide in Rwanda against the Tutsi, they had to be profiled as insects, as cockroaches that needed to be killed. And when we think of how often we hear those kinds of stereotypes around the world, people referred to as weeds that need to be uprooted, as cancers that need to be removed, there are lessons we need to learn.

There are also lessons to learn, in understanding that social media was created to get people to engage with each other and socialize but at the same time, hate speech can be amplified through social media.

We should worry about amplification of hate speech through radio, and through all these common mediums, that really amplify voices.

So specifically for Rwanda. I spent time there last year. I had just been appointed to this office as the Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, it was extremely important for me to travel to Rwanda to pay my respects to the victims and survivors.

What lessons we can draw from Rwanda?

A lesson we can draw from Rwanda is that acknowledging the past in understanding the suffering of one another is extremely important.

I went to Rwanda and Bosnia Herzegovina to pay my respects to the victims and the survivors. But at the same time, I wanted to speak out strongly against **genocide denial**. I am glad that people speaking up against genocide denial has gained traction. Now, people are brave enough to face these **genocide deniers** and I'm glad that this is happening, because we must counter the Holocaust deniers as well as those who deny the Srebrenica and Rwanda genocides.

We must work strongly against the glorification of genocidaires and war criminals. We must not celebrate people who perpetrated genocides. Sometimes the pull of the ethnic community is so strong, so that people feel that “this is a genocidaire, but he's our genocidaire”. We really must stop the glorification of genocidaires. They are criminals. That a person can organise the killing of millions of people and that the ethnic, the racial, the religious, or the national inclination of their community is to support that person is something we should really interrogate.

The other lesson we need to learn is to avoid the attribution of collective guilt and understand that in any society, there are political differences about the way society should be organized. However, polarization that feeds on hatred, incitement and denial of past crimes, especially on genocide denial, is not acceptable and must be countered, we are here to counter it.

One of the reasons I speak so strongly about denial of genocide, is that we know that denial of genocide actually constitutes preparation for another genocide. We have also learned that no society is free of risk, and no country is immune to genocide, especially where these crimes have occurred in the past.

We've learned that we must be alert because the risk of recurrence of genocide is always there. One of the reasons I speak so strongly about denial of genocide, is that we know that denial of genocide actually constitutes preparation for another genocide.

We have also learned that no society is free of risk, and no country is immune to genocide, especially where these crimes have occurred in the past.

So ultimately, I would say the biggest lesson is that there's a lot of work to be done around building consensus among a critical mass of people to share the same objective in which we work towards a world free of hate and division, where genocide no longer happens.

We have to often explain to people what hate speech can do, in terms of leading up to genocide, and I worry that the world has not learned its lessons and that the world hasn't learned that communities can live together in peace and dignity, because really, that is the inherent right that we are born with.

You have talked about a “New approach to preventing Genocide”, which involves engaging communities at the grassroots directly. How does this method work?

I consider it a priority to translate, from an inter-generational perspective, the concept of genocide prevention as an international, regional, and national norm into a practical reality implemented at the community level. So much research points at genocide happening within local communities, pointing at civilians as the primary target.

Prevention of genocide is still largely understood as an approach that should be taken from national, regional, and international perspectives. However, prevention of genocide and atrocity crimes, must become a reality at the community level.

We have begun to do so at the community level as regards analysis of atrocity crimes - communities need to be equipped to understand what is happening to them as well as respond. Strengthening analysis and response at the community level allows us to be context-specific and to listen more. It is important that we adapt our analysis methodology to the needs of the specific contexts.

Communities living in situations where risk factors for genocide exist need to be listened to more, sometimes they know what response actions can be more effective. We need to be able to accommodate their knowledge and sustain efforts without losing the current traction we have of preventing genocide at the national, regional and international level.

We are therefore building traction worldwide for locally-led initiatives on prevention of genocide by strengthening the capacities of community organizations, through for instance, identifying the policy and advocacy processes within the genocide and other atrocity crimes prevention fields with the potential for most impact at community level, building a global movement of relationships between local practitioners and local academics to initiate research, sharing best practices on prevention of atrocity crimes and supporting use of social media to prevent atrocity crimes.

The other mandate for your office is dealing with hate speech. What would you describe as hate speech and how can we counter it?

There is no common definition of hate speech, but we have the UN definition of hate speech contained in our Plan of Action against hate speech. Usually, we recommend to people to adopt our UN definition and we have convinced social media companies to adopt it.

We have the international legal standards for forms of hate speech that constitute incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence, but we don't have an international legal definition for hate speech. The characterization of what is hateful is controversial and disputed.

Often people speak about hate speech in context, for example, like in the US, where freedom of expression is held so strongly, there is always pushback against using the term hate speech, because they say there's a very thin line between freedom of speech and freedom of expression.

According to the UN, hate speech is any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality,

race, colour, descent, gender, or other forms of identity. This provides guidance to the entire UN system on how to tackle hate speech in a holistic way and we have the UN plan of action.

According to the UN, hate speech is any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender, or other forms of identity. This provides guidance to the entire UN system on how to tackle hate speech in a holistic way and we have the UN plan of action.

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action has 13 commitments that provide a kind of blueprint for action to contain and address hate speech in line with international human rights standards.

How would these work in Africa?

The 13 commitments are wide and varied. For Member States in Africa, one of the most important commitments is **enhancing partnerships with the external actors**, including other Member States. It really stresses the need for the UN to act together with other stakeholders to curb this phenomenon.

Tech and social media companies also have a role to play in countering hate speech. We have spent a lot of time meeting with these companies, my Office has a tradition of having roundtables to discuss these issues.

Which tech and social media companies are you involving in the UN strategy against hate speech?

In October, I briefed the UN Security Council on the topic of tech and social media companies and hate speech and invited companies to brief - including Facebook, Google, Twitter, Tik Tok, Apple, YouTube, etc. We continue to meet them periodically and talk about what we can do better in containing hate speech.

We tell these companies that hate speech has proliferated online and that they have amplified this phenomenon. This is the conversation that we took to the UN Security Council, we made it public. We talked about how hate speech has increased - especially the reach and speed through which hate speech is spread.

We've noticed that for minority groups, or those perceived to be different, they continue to be targets and victims of hate speech. They continue to be scapegoated for challenges faced by communities or countries. And we saw that during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was such a crisis in terms of hate speech against minorities.

Hate speech in the past has contributed to conflict and violence, and of course, genocides including the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The genocide in Srebrenica, was characterized by dehumanization and derogatory language in speeches by political leaders, among others.

In Iraq, a campaign that was launched by Da'esh/ISIL against minority groups like the Yazidi, much of it was accompanied by hate speech and does point to the likely commission of a genocide.

In Myanmar, hate speech was used to describe Rohingya as sub-human.

What is your message as the world commemorate 28 years since the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda?

When I visited Rwanda last year, I reminded Rwandans that their country has great historical significance to the existence of my mandate. I traveled to Rwanda from Bosnia Herzegovina, where the Srebrenica genocide happened.

For Rwanda, Martin Luther King said the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. Justice must continue to be done. Those people who perpetrated genocide need to be brought to justice.

It's a good thing what is happening, and not just in Rwanda. We saw in Germany last year, quite a number of people, many of them in their 90s standing trial. There was a 96-year-old woman who was a secretary to the commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, she faced trial for complicity in the killings of people in the camp. There was even a 100-year-old man who allegedly served as a guard in a Nazi concentration camp, and he stood trial. It is common knowledge that we have many indicted people who are still at large, and some of them are living normal lives in Member States of the UN without fear of being brought to justice. This impunity undermines what my Office stands for.

As the Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser for Prevention of Genocide to the Secretary-General, it is incumbent on my Office to join hands with everybody who is seeking accountability for perpetrators of genocide and related crimes, and to help to provide very strong deterrence to would-be perpetrators of genocide.

Related links:

Video message by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, on the occasion of the International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda
(<https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1e/k1e6hdaxgf>)

Genocide perpetrators must be brought to book
(<https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2022/genocide-perpetrators-must-be-brought-book>) - Op-Ed by Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu, (*Africa Renewal*, 7 April 2022)

Outreach Program on the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the United Nations
(<https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/>)

Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre: Using the past to protect the present and future (<https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/august-2020/johannesburg-holocaust-and-genocide-centre-using-past-protect-present-and>) (*Africa Renewal*, 18 August 2020)

Genocide happens when democracy is absent (<https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/august-2020/genocide-happens-when-democracy-absent>) - Interview with Ms. Tali Nates, Founder and Executive Director of the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre, (*Africa Renewal*, 18 August 2020)

For more information on COVID-19, visit **www.un.org/coronavirus** (<http://www.un.org/coronavirus>)

Africa Renewal (<https://www.un.org/africarenewal/coronavirus>)

Disclaimer: "The views expressed in this article are the **author's** own and do not necessarily reflect ModernGhana official position. ModernGhana will not be responsible or liable for any inaccurate or incorrect statements contained in this article."
