



TASK FORCE ON THE EU PREVENTION OF MASS ATROCITIES



The Distinction between Conflict Prevention and Mass Atrocity Prevention

In March 2013, the Task Force on the EU Prevention of Mass Atrocities launched its report, entitled ‘The EU and the Prevention of Mass Atrocities: An Assessment of Strengths and Weaknesses’. One of the key messages in that report is that mass atrocity prevention and conflict prevention can complement each other, but are nonetheless distinct areas and therefore diplomats and policy-makers should ensure that a ‘mass atrocity lens’ is used when assessing and analysing situations and potential policy responses. This brief note elaborates on the distinction between conflict prevention and mass atrocity prevention.¹

Conflict prevention is by now a strongly endorsed and fairly well-established and resourced policy of the EU and most of its member states,² whereas hardly any references can be found in EU or national documents to the prevention of mass atrocities or the three specific crimes covered by the responsibility to protect.. Within European policy-making circles, there is a fairly widespread view that conflict prevention encompasses mass atrocity prevention as they both involve ‘violence’ or ‘instability’, and therefore no adjustment is needed to existing policies, doctrines, institutions, practices and instruments.

The Task Force in line with expert opinion on this matter, however, emphasises that focusing on conflict prevention alone will not be sufficient to effectively prevent of mass atrocities and make the responsibility to protect a reality:

¹ A longer discussion of this can be found in the work of Alex Bellamy
<http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pab/BellamyPAB22011.pdf>

² In the case of the EU, it is mentioned in the Lisbon Treaty (article 10a) and the EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflict of 2001; in the case of Germany, we find the Action Plan for Civilian Conflict Prevention and Peace Consolidation (2004); and in the case of the UK, there is the Building Stability Overseas Strategy (2011).

First of all, mass atrocities can occur outside of times of violent armed conflict or after fighting has ended, so mass atrocity prevention may be needed even in situations requiring no conflict prevention. Since the end of World War II, 32 percent of all cases of mass atrocities have occurred outside periods of armed conflict. This proportion is not stable but can vary over time with the trend since the 1980s suggesting a decline in the number of cases of mass atrocities outside of war to around 15 percent. Examples of mass atrocities occurring outside of war include the Cambodian genocide in the late 1970s, large-scale killings and disappearances in Argentina, Chile and elsewhere in Latin America in the 1980s, the massacres in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, the killings in East Timor in 1999, the Andijan massacre in Uzbekistan in 2005, and the violence targeted at particular groups that followed elections in Kenya in 2007.

Secondly, mass atrocities are always unlawful, inexcusable and need to be prevented, whereas legitimate reasons and circumstances exist for why arms are taken up within and between states as the ultimate means of ending oppression and injustice. Conflict prevention as a policy objective faces considerable moral dilemmas as the cases of ex-Yugoslavia, or more recently, the Arab uprisings demonstrate. The same cannot be said for the goal of mass atrocity prevention and global norm of R2P.

Thirdly, even when conflict prevention has failed or no means of stopping armed conflict are available to outside actors, it is not too late to focus on preventing mass atrocities. Conflict parties can be reminded of their responsibility to protect civilians and reminded of their culpability for war crimes. Indirect or direct assistance to particular parties in a conflict can be made conditional on commitments to refraining from targeting particular ethnic or religious group if they are victorious. Non-coercive measures can be taken to establish safe-haven, corridors, and other measures enabling civilians to get out of harms way.

Finally, forecasting, detecting, preventing and stopping these crimes requires specific capacities and approaches that are different from the generic mapping and prevention of political instability or violent conflict as it is commonly understood. In order to adequately spot the risk of mass atrocities specific indicators need to be monitored related to regime-type and political discourse that are different from generic criteria. Intelligence needed to support mass atrocity response operations is different from that needed for generic crisis management operations. If the international community does not employ a mass atrocity lens then the response to any outbreak of mass atrocities could not only be inadequate but also inappropriate. For example, on 16/17 May 1994, the Council of the EU issued a declaration on Rwanda which firstly appealed for an end to the genocide taking place in the

country, but then urged all parties to negotiate an end to the 'conflict'. Had a mass atrocity lens been used, then the EU might well have focused more on steps that could be taken to end the genocide itself, such as, for a start, naming and condemning the perpetrators of the genocide.

In sum, including indicators for the risk of mass atrocities within general frameworks for identifying potential situations of conflict or instability is a step in the right direction. But it is not enough: the design of a continuum of steps tailored to mass atrocity risks and the particular needs as well as an agreed specific mechanism to launch timely actions are crucial prerequisites for effectively addressing the threats of mass atrocities. Therefore the Task Force argues that a 'mass atrocity lens' is needed at all stages of the policy process.