

High-level event on atrocity prevention

On the occasion of the handover of the Chair of GAAMAC

Remarks by Mô Bleeker

16 November 2020

Excellency High Commissioner on Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet,

Excellency, representatives of the UN Missions in Geneva,

Dear Members of the GAAMAC Steering Group,

Dear Partners of GAAMAC,

Dear Members of the GAAMAC Community of Commitment,

Dear Silvia Fernández de Gurmendi, Chair-Elect of GAAMAC

Ambassador Federico Villegas Beltrán,

Ambassador Jürg Lauber,

Let me first thank Ms. Bachelet, High Commissioner for her excellent keynote and all her efforts to promote one of the essential pillars of prevention: human rights. Thank you also to my two colleagues and friends Federico and Jürg, who have been so supportive and have agreed to host this event.

I am very happy to be here for this chair handover. In fact, I have been looking forward to this moment since GAAMAC was created in 2013. For GAAMAC, indeed, this is an important signal attesting to the credibility of this initiative. From Switzerland to Argentina, the chair passes now to Ms. Fernández de Gurmendi. Silvia, I am very honoured that a personality of your stature has agreed to take over this role. You will do wonders as you have done in your brilliant career.

I, therefore, feel at this moment a deep sense of satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, and with you, I am proud of the road we have travelled together.

Let me first share a bit of GAAMAC history with you all. In 2008, Silvia and I met while working together on the Nuremberg Declaration on Justice and Peace. We shared our concerns about the numerous blockages

that prevention was facing at the multilateral level. We decided that it was time to listen to the many opinions, lessons learned, experiences and visions on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect from the field and to ensure that these multiple narratives on prevention in action would be listened to.

This is how, in December 2008, the First Regional Forum on Genocide Prevention took place in Buenos Aires, with an extraordinary level of participation from 18 Latin American governments, civil society, experts and Francis Deng and Edward Luck among others. The results were convincing. Prevention experiences were taking place on the ground; some had even succeeded in preventing the commission of atrocities. Participants said that it was necessary to develop a narrative of prevention successes, that dialogue and cooperation between governments, experts and civil society are crucial to achieving tangible results. Participants stressed that these efforts must become permanent. The results of the other three following forums, in Tanzania, Switzerland and Cambodia, were similar: in the opinion of the participants, there was an urgent need for cooperation among all prevention actors, beyond ideological or programmatic affiliations. Moreover, the creation of several parallel networks, each with its own thematic focus, was a concrete example of how working in silos was certainly becoming a counterproductive practice.

Inspired by these observations, impressed by the ownership and desire to move forward with concrete prevention strategies on the ground, and with the complicity of Ambassador Liberata Mulamula and the Tanzanian government, we invited some of the main leaders of the R2P and Genocide Prevention coalitions to a retreat in Arusha in 2013. The central question to be addressed was simple: the prevention of atrocities is urgent, what can we do together to make prevention a reality on the ground, to overcome our divides and silo culture, to go beyond mere intentions and resolutions at the multilateral level? To lead to a joint constructive and cooperative effort where the diversity of our cultures, histories are precious assets for the implementation of multiple domestic strategies, where national actors are centrally involved and their results on the ground tangible, and in turn useful at the multilateral and regional levels?

During this retreat, participants decided to launch the Global Action against Mass Atrocities (GAAMAC), a joint platform where civil society and governments cooperate to strengthen the capacity of each society to develop domestic strategies and architectures for atrocity prevention. By choosing the overarching term “atrocities”, it allowed us to unite the efforts of all those working on prevention but under different labels. Little by little, this space for dialogue has emerged as a necessary, horizontal, inclusive and cooperative space for reflection, for joint learning and action, complementary to existing networks.

Our founding document insists that no society is immune to atrocities, and that prevention begins at home. The act of committing mass atrocities is part of a long-term process and requires preparation and premeditation. Calls for hatred, discrimination, racism, incitement to violence, non-recognition of election results, for example, are some of the signals to be taken very seriously that can lead to the commission of atrocities. By taking these early indicators seriously, and by acting upstream, we know that it is indeed possible to prevent contexts from becoming conducive to the commission of atrocities. States have a central responsibility in this regard and can count on the cooperation of many civil society actors to help them in this endeavour. The strengthening of institutions promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law are, among others, crucial and fundamental pillars.

But it must be noted that we are far from having succeeded. Here, in Europe, for example, we hear calls for hatred and witness violence against particular communities because of their ethnic, spiritual or even political affiliation, sometimes with the support of the highest political leadership. The resurgence of movements claiming to be affiliated with Nazism, for example, or the crimes committed under the pretext of an exclusive and/or fundamentalist nature, the weaponisation of social medias, all these elements, among others, show us how much work we still have to do here and now. In addition, when the Security Council is paralyzed in the face of extreme situations such as Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, not to mention the recent tragedies in Srebrenica, Rwanda, the situation of the Yazidis, and so many minorities in different countries. We may ask ourselves whether we, the international community, do really understand what prevention is about. Do we understand that when the house is burning, it is simply too late? We all know that if we act timely, it is much easier, and may be successful and it is less costly; so, why is it so difficult? There is a lot of work to be done to develop a prevention pedagogy, to encourage prevention, to make prevention a reality on the ground and to show the concrete results of prevention. This is the *raison d'être* of GAAMAC, and this effort is urgent.

I am proud to underline that, in addition to its function as a platform, GAAMAC has produced tangible results in the field; three regional GAAMAC groups are working hard. The Africa Working Group has already produced a Manual for the Creation of National Mechanisms for the Prevention of Atrocities and is now developing a prototype course on this subject. The Asia Pacific Working Group is producing a report looking at good practices and lessons learned in the area of hate speech, discrimination and incitement to violence in the Asian context; it will contain public policy recommendations. The Americas Working Group is working on another report about the importance of gender-informed prevention strategies, it will also include with public policy recommendations.

While our fourth Global Meeting has been postponed until November 2021 due to COVID-19, during 2020, a large number of webinars have brought together different prevention networks and actors to talk about the role of social media in preparing conditions conducive to atrocities, notably through the propagation of hate speech. All these meetings will provide tangible recommendations for the Global meeting in November 2021. Important regional and multilateral organizations, governments and key actors are contacting GAAMAC to exchange, learn and become part of this Community of Commitment. I am also hopeful that funders will seriously begin to invest in prevention.

Ladies and gentlemen, GAAMAC is building further on the efforts of many precursors who began the work long before us. I would like to salute here a great young man born in 1926 who has done and continues to do pioneering work in the prevention of genocide. A man who honours me with his friendship and his trust: Yehuda Bauer. Yehuda, you inspire us to continue this work of prevention of all genocides, of all atrocities; thank you for your vibrant example.

A word of gratitude also for a great friend, a brother, Adama Dieng, the former Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, and Karen Smith, the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect and her team with whom we have worked so wonderfully and will continue to work. And a very warm welcome to Adama's successor, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, the new Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, a woman of exceptional qualities with whom we are looking forward to working with. Thank you also to the Department of Foreign Affairs, my

colleagues, my government: you have trusted me, encouraged me to move forward and to do everything possible to contribute to prevention, thank you!

I would also like to thank the incredible team of bright young women of the Support Office, Jelena, Sabrina, Elena and Anne Laure, as well as the contribution of each member of the Steering Group. Together, we have invested a lot in new cooperation culture, in methodology and facilitation. That is, in creating ways and means for better dialogue, listening, real cooperation and exchange. During GAAMAC meetings, everyone, wherever one comes from, is an equal partner, differences of opinion are welcome, changing opinion during the exchange is also welcome, consensus are built and results belong to everyone. The GAAMAC, culture means that we do name the problems by their name, we recognize them and take responsibility for transforming these problems into opportunities, into solutions. In GAAMAC, we do not point fingers, we encourage each of us to do better; we talk about real difficult issues in an atmosphere of trust, we even agree to disagree; but foremost we agree to pursue the dialogue. I am convinced that this GAAMAC culture is key to translate the many words and declarations about prevention into action programs and tangible results on the ground.

Violence, ladies and gentlemen, hatred, discrimination, the construction of another "enemy" make the death knell of democracy, of citizen confidence, actually the death knell of civilization resonate. The result of these dynamics, where private interests prevail over the common good, where evil is trivialized and the capacity for destruction takes over, is that we are all dehumanized without a present, without a tomorrow. Faced with this, we cannot just remain observers, bystanders: we shall take our responsibility.

Practising prevention adds quality to our democracies. Practising prevention is giving a chance to what we could call human civilization; it also contributes to a dignified and fair future for each and every one. Finally, prevention is how we can fulfil our duty as citizens of the world and our responsibility as governments, Briefly, this is how we can simply practise "being human".

Now, as your welcoming present, dear Silvia, I have the immense pleasure of gifting you and the GAAMAC community, the latest edition of *Politorbis*. This last edition of the political journal of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs has brought together several dozen of magnificent authors from all continents and all disciplines. They share in-depth reflections on the current challenges of atrocity prevention, as well as their recommendations.

Thank you, Silvia. Thank you to each member of the Steering Group, to you all here with us virtually from so many places in the world and finally thank you to each and every one of you for the trust you have placed in me over the years and all the great work accomplished together.

Over to you, dear Simon.