

**High-level event on atrocity prevention**  
**on the occasion of the handover of the Chair of GAAMAC**

**Remarks by Silvia Fernández de Gurmendi**

**16 November 2020**

Your Excellency, High Commissioner of Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet,

Your Excellencies, Ambassadors Geissbühler and Lauber of Switzerland and Villegas Beltrán of Argentina,

Distinguished Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in Geneva,

Distinguished members, partners and friends of GAAMAC,

Dear colleagues,

All of us have a responsibility to ask ourselves what we can do to prevent the commission of the most serious crimes against populations. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity of assuming my own part of this responsibility as the new Chair of this global alliance for the prevention of mass atrocities, GAAMAC.

I thank Switzerland and all the members of the steering group of GAAMAC for placing their trust and confidence in me and Argentina to continue the extraordinary work of my predecessor and dear friend, Mò Bleeker. I am humbled by the task and deeply grateful to Mò, as she has been at the origin of initiatives that led to the founding of GAAMAC in 2013, as well as its Chair and driving force since then.

I cannot really expect to be able to replace her, but I can and do commit myself to continue her hard work to the best of my abilities. I know I can count on her continuing cooperation; there is no such thing as stepping down from prevention efforts. I also know that I can count on the support of the esteemed members of the steering group, the support office and the Association for the GAAMAC Support Office to guide and assist me in the challenging task ahead.

As it has been recalled today, GAAMAC is a platform intended to promote initiatives and foster the political will of states to enshrine in their national agendas appropriate preventive policies and mechanisms.

We know from experience that atrocities do not happen overnight but that they are the outcome of long processes that can and must be prevented. The precursors of violence, which include racism,

xenophobia, antisemitism, islamophobia and other forms of discrimination, intolerance and exclusion, are also well known and we have already many of the tools necessary to identify and combat them. Indeed, in the last 70 years we have developed an impressive set of standards, procedures and institutions to fight discrimination and other forms of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

In the last three decades, in particular, we have also developed more effective means and rigorous methodologies to investigate and determine facts and collect and safeguard evidence of violations. Most importantly, we have established courts and tribunals and multiplied proceedings to ensure individual accountability for the gravest crimes. After years of sustained justice initiatives, a global system of justice is gradually emerging, which combines national, international and hybrid proceedings against the perpetrators of atrocities. These are all huge and encouraging developments. The fact that calls for accountability for atrocity crimes have now become the norm, is probably the biggest achievement of the last three decades for the prevention of crimes and the promotion of the rule of law.

And yet, atrocity crimes continue to happen today, at this very moment, in various regions of the world. It is clear that despite some achievements, we continue to lack the required awareness and political will to adopt and maintain in each of our countries the necessary architecture to combat the underlying causes of violence on a permanent basis, before they escalate into conflict and massive crimes.

Prevention is a long term and permanent endeavour. It requires remembrance to honour past victims and understand why they suffered. It requires a long-term investment in education to help generations to learn from each other and to enhance the resilience of populations against simplistic messages of intolerance and hatred. It requires effective policies, laws and mechanisms to warn and react in a timely manner against the first signals of violence. Last but not least, it requires appropriate accountability mechanisms in order to ensure the responsibility of the gravest perpetrators.

History teaches us and current developments demonstrate that no society is immune to atrocities. Wherever they happen they affect us all, directly or indirectly, as they shake stability and peace across borders and regions. In our interdependent world, prevention of mass atrocities is not only a moral and legal imperative. It is also in self-interest as no society can expect to lead a peaceful and prosperous life when entire communities continue to be devastated by violence and conflict elsewhere. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the Convention related to Refugees, we cannot but recall that over the past decade, outbreaks of violence, fighting and conflict have forced millions of people to flee their homes and have generated the massive displacement of people not only towards neighbouring countries but also towards other regions and continents.

No society is immune and no society can fight atrocities and its consequences by itself. Regional and international collaboration and coordination is needed and GAAMAC hopes to contribute to such collaboration among all relevant actors. While GAAMAC is a state led initiative, it recognizes that in our diversified world not only states but also non state actors - including not only civil society organizations but also the private sector and big technological companies-, have a huge role to play to prevent the dissemination of hatred in all its forms. The steering group of GAAMAC unites both state and non- state

actors and also seeks to enlarge its network by liaising effectively with other states, organizations and institutions.

And of course, in this multilateral effort, the relation with the United Nations is of paramount importance. We celebrate the emphasis placed on prevention by the Secretary-General and we are grateful in particular for the close and productive relation with its Office of Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect and its Special Advisers Adama Dieng and Karen Smith. In particular, and like Mò Bleeker before me, I wish to extend my warm thanks and farewell to my dear friend, Adama Dieng. I also wish to congratulate and express my best wishes to his successor, Alice Wairimu Nderitu. I look forward to continuing our good work with her and her Office.

I also wish to thank the High Commissioner for Human Rights and her Office for the fundamental work they accomplish in the area of prevention. I wholeheartedly thank Ms. Bachelet for her participation and important statement in this event today. I hope we can contribute to her efforts from GAAMAC and wish to reiterate our willingness to cooperate with her and her Office to the largest extent possible.

Today, upon the closure of this inaugural event, the work of GAAMAC shall resume. We will start a three-day virtual retreat, in which we will discuss, in particular, our vision, strategies and activities for the next three years. We know where we come from. Now we need to determine what we think we must and can accomplish in this future period and also reflect on how the institutional structure of GAAMAC should be reinforced in order for the platform to achieve its goals.

I look forward to listening to our members' thoughts and initiatives. In this regard I also thank Mò for gathering the reflections and recommendations of a larger community in this publication that she has assembled as a departure and more than welcome gift. I am confident that these ideas will also contribute to enrich our exchanges at the Steering Group.

I am thrilled to become the new Chair of GAAMAC and eager to resume its good work.

I am eager to work together with all of you.

I thank you for your attention.