

The Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
London, SW1A 2AH

Copied to: James Kariuki, UK Focal Point for the Responsibility to Protect

Monday 10th December 2018

Dear Foreign Secretary,

We, the undersigned, write as representatives of UK-based civil society organisations that work, in many different ways, to reduce the risk of mass atrocities worldwide. In somber reflection on the seventy years that have passed since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention, we write with regards to UK contributions to the growing challenge of atrocity prevention.

We welcomed the acknowledgment you gave at Policy Exchange in October of the Foreign Affairs Committee report, published 10th September, on 'Global Britain; the UK's Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention', as well as your own pledge to 'do more' within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office budget to prevent mass atrocities. We were also pleased to see Lord Ahmad in June affirm that 'the UK's cross-Government approach to atrocity prevention includes the prediction and prevention of identity-based mass violence'.

We also welcomed the practical recommendations to enhance UK contributions to atrocity prevention that came out of the recent Foreign Affairs Committee report. Many of our organisations submitted evidence to that inquiry, and were pleased to see the FAC's conclusion that 'everything that we have heard as part of this inquiry has strengthened our belief that an atrocity prevention strategy is now more vital than ever'. This recommendation echoed previous reports, published in March 2018, from the International Development and Foreign Affairs Committees on UK policy in Burma, which called on the Government to prioritise atrocity prevention and learn lessons so that those identified shortcomings in the UK's response to atrocity risks would not be repeated elsewhere.

These developments demonstrate increasing support across the political spectrum, and across Whitehall, for stronger British leadership in the prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocities. Indeed, the 2017 Conservative Party's Kigali Declaration Against Genocide and Identity-based Violence stated that 'we need to apply atrocity prevention to our international development and foreign policies but also to our arms sales, our migration and refugee policies, our work to combat climate change'.

However, the FCO's official response, dated 8th November, to the Foreign Affairs Committee's report, does not appear to reflect your personal commitment or answer these rising calls for human rights, peacebuilding and atrocity prevention to be placed at the heart of its Global Britain strategy. We were disappointed – and indeed surprised – that the FCO seemed to reject the Committee's core recommendation that Government set out a cross-departmental strategy on atrocity prevention.

We respectfully request that you reconsider your response to this particular recommendation by the Foreign Affairs Committee and open a public consultation. Engaging with UK and international civil society on this agenda would be in line with global best practice, as well as with the FAC's recommendation that 'such a strategy would benefit from consultation and we call on the Government to produce a draft strategy for consultation by April 2019'.

Meanwhile, we respectfully request that Her Majesty's Government makes public the work it is doing on atrocity prevention, as referenced in the FCO's response, and clarifies how this departs from, or adds to, the Government's work on conflict prevention. A consolidated public statement of the work that HMG is doing on atrocity prevention would, in lieu of a strategy, help civil society to identify how and where to best support existing efforts to prevent atrocities and facilitate the identification of risks and gaps. We also ask for public clarification of which minister has official oversight of HMG's atrocity prevention policy, as there has been a lack of clarity, and no public statement, on this point.

As experts working across the spectrum of issues relating to atrocity prevention, we remain at your and your office's disposal to provide technical advice on how the UK can strengthen its approach. Our collective analysis suggests that viewing UK strategy and decision making through the lens of how best to prevent identity-based violence and mass atrocities, would, at the very least, enhance the coordination of information across Government. Clarifying Ministerial responsibility for UK contributions to atrocity prevention would improve transparency and demonstrate commitment to doing more on this agenda. Better resourcing the office of the UK Focal Point for the Responsibility to Protect with specific atrocity prevention expertise would also mean the UK was supporting global best practice.

The FCO's response to the inquiry implied that it does not need a new strategy because atrocity prevention falls within its wider conflict prevention strategy and is 'well-established' within existing workstreams. However, our analysis shows that existing strategies, policies and responses leave gaps in how HMG currently approaches the prediction and prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocities *before* violence begins. Once the point of violence has been reached, lack of strategic and departmental clarity obscures where responsibility for decision making lies, resulting in missed opportunities. These gaps are therefore worthy of closer attention.

We know that mass atrocities - gross, widespread and systemic violations of human rights, often linked to identity - can occur in conflict situations, such as in Syria and Yemen, but also outside conflict, such as in Myanmar and North Korea. Therefore, enhancing British atrocity prevention approaches requires analysing both areas such as Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where many risk factors for conflict and atrocity are present, but also areas such as Venezuela, Egypt and Nigeria, where hate speech and compromised state institutions give rise to the risks of peacetime atrocities.

We consider that an effective cross-government approach to atrocity prevention would integrate prediction and prevention into and across policy and practice decision making; which would range from the development of policy on sanctions, to trade, humanitarian assistance, international development, migration and asylum policy and diplomacy. This would lead to more robust understanding of those warning signs that differ from the warnings of conflict and of the nature of the risks civilians face. It would enable the UK to identify the options available to better bridge the growing gap between early warning and early preventative, mitigating or protective actions.

We understand that it is crucial to manage expectations when talking about how to tackle crimes as vast and as complicated as mass atrocities. However, it is evident that the increase in atrocity crimes we have seen since 2012 will only continue, as the global trend of identity-politics, the consequences of climate change and the historically high numbers of displaced people converge. Britain, as it seeks to forge a new global identity, and as a permanent member of the Security Council and major donor, has an opportunity to develop a national approach to this rising challenge, both as a matter of national interest and of international stability, as well as of human security.

As with other global challenges, the effective prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocity crimes will require consistent, joined-up effort. We believe that if Parliament, civil society, and Her Majesty's Government work together, the UK can, and will, lead by example.

Sincerely,

Catherine Anderson, CEO, Jo Cox Foundation

Clara Connolly, Syria Solidarity UK

Maddy Crowther, Co-Executive Director, Waging Peace

Amrita Farook, Student Director, STAND UK

Dr Kate Ferguson, Director of Research and Policy, Protection Approaches

Jacqueline Geis, Chief Operating Officer, Videre est Credere

Richard Gowing, Director, Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice

Dylan Mathews, Chief Executive, Peace Direct

Anna Roberts, Executive Director, Burma Campaign UK

Natalie Samarasinghe, Executive Director, UNA-UK

Dr James Smith, CEO, Aegis Trust

Dr Cristina Stefan, Co-Director, European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect