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**Integrated and coordinated implementation of and
follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations
conferences and summits in the economic, social and
related fields**

Follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit

**The responsibility to protect and the prevention of
genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes
against humanity**

**Responsibility to protect: the commitment to prevent and
protect populations from atrocity crimes**

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [75/277](#), sets out advances and challenges in prevention, protection and response in relation to the responsibility to protect, in line with the commitment affirmed in paragraphs 138 and 139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome.



I. Introduction

1. In the 2005 World Summit Outcome document, the General Assembly recognized that each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.¹ Member States agreed that the international community should, as appropriate, encourage and help States to exercise this responsibility and, should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, be prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations (see resolution 60/1, paras. 138 and 139). This constituted a political commitment based on applicable legal obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, as well as various treaties, including the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, to prevent and address the risks, causes and drivers of atrocity crimes² and strengthen global resilience against the occurrence of such crimes.

2. The provisions of paragraphs 138 and 139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome define the framework within which Member States, regional arrangements and the United Nations system and its partners can seek to give a doctrinal, policy and institutional life to the responsibility to protect. Since 2005, States have repeatedly reaffirmed that commitment. The General Assembly, the Security Council and the Human Rights Council have all made references to the responsibility to protect.³ Significantly, in 2021, the Assembly decided to include an item focused on the responsibility to protect in its annual agenda and requested the Secretary-General to report annually on the matter (see resolution 75/277). In total, there have been 15 reports⁴ on the responsibility to protect prior to the present report, all but 1 of which were followed by informal interactive dialogues or plenary meetings of the Assembly.⁵

3. As of today, 61 countries and two regional organizations have appointed focal points for the responsibility to protect, and 53 Member States and the European Union are members of the Group of Friends of the Responsibility to Protect in New York and Geneva.

4. This demonstrates a clear willingness among diverse stakeholders to implement the 2005 commitment and maximize the potential of mutually complementary efforts between national, regional and international actors.

5. Civil society organizations are recognized partners in the implementation of the commitment and are mobilizing in the face of mass atrocity crimes all over the world. They are calling upon States and the international community to implement their commitment, prevent these atrocities and protect populations effectively.

6. Yet despite this solemn commitment and corresponding actions, the promise of halting atrocity crimes remains unfulfilled. There is an ongoing disregard for international humanitarian law and international human rights law by both State and

¹ Ethnic cleansing has not been recognized as an independent crime under international law. See www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/ethnic-cleansing.shtml.

² The term “atrocity crimes” is used in the present report as a collective term to refer to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

³ See www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/key-documents.shtml.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ No meetings were held in 2020 owing to the constraints of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

non-State actors.⁶ Today, even verified early warning information about the risks of atrocity crimes or evidence of crimes committed is at times met by Member States with indifference, denial or even active repression. On all levels, decisions to prevent and halt atrocities in some instances are not taken in a timely manner or simply not taken at all. This collective failure to protect populations undermines trust in the international system. It is urgent to act on the commitment to protect populations from these crimes.

7. The present report is aimed at evaluating the current state of the prevention of and protection against atrocity crimes, as well as proposing ways in which the responsibility to protect can serve as a framework to enhance prevention and protection.

II. Global patterns in the ongoing commission of atrocities

8. The responsibility to protect was borne out of the mass atrocity tragedies of the twentieth century, including the Holocaust, the killing fields of Cambodia and the genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, among other mass atrocities. Since the 2005 World Summit, the Special Advisers to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect have sought to clarify ways in which the responsibility to protect can help to prevent the most serious crimes of concern to the international community. There is now a greater understanding of the risk factors that exacerbate their occurrence, the dynamics that enable these crimes and the actions that may prevent them from emerging. Today, sophisticated knowledge and capacity are available for the promotion of human rights and the rule of law, for the protection of civilians and for the prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts, including the need to bring more diverse voices to the table to ensure the sustainability of peace processes.

A. Patterns of violations of international humanitarian law

9. The world is facing the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War (see [A/78/73-E/2023/61](#)). Over the past decade, the United Nations has witnessed and documented a growing pattern of State and non-State actors employing methods and means of warfare that disregard human life and may have amounted to violations of international humanitarian law. In some cases, parties to conflicts perpetrate such violations in a manner that intentionally causes the gravest possible harm to civilians. Acts that violate international humanitarian law may also constitute war crimes and may amount to or form part of crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing or genocide.

10. The need to protect civilians (see [S/2024/385](#)) in the conduct of hostilities is central to upholding international humanitarian law, but the principles of distinction, proportionality, necessity and precaution in attacks are routinely violated. The indiscriminate use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects⁷ in populated civilian areas (ibid.), including cluster munitions,⁸ and the laying of landmines and other explosive ordnance⁹ have been documented. The past decade has seen the usage of chemical weapons against civilians in conflicts, which are banned by the Convention

⁶ Joyce Msuya, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, “Annual briefing to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict”, statement delivered on 21 May 2024.

⁷ See www.unocha.org/explosive-weapons-populated-areas.

⁸ Cluster Munition Coalition, *Cluster Munitions Monitor 2023* (2023).

⁹ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, *Landmine Monitor 2023* (Geneva, 2023).

on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction.¹⁰

11. In many situations, identity is a primary driver of conflict, with civilians targeted on the basis of their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, descent, gender or other identity factors.¹¹ Children continue to be targeted during armed conflict (see [A/77/895-S/2023/363](#)). Sexual violence also continues to be used as a tactic of war, as a tactic of terrorism (see Security Council resolution [2467 \(2019\)](#)) or as a form of torture (see [S/2024/292](#)). State and non-State armed groups use sexual violence to consolidate control over territories and lucrative natural resources (see resolution [2467 \(2019\)](#)). In several settings, conflict-related sexual violence is perpetrated as a form of retaliation against individuals and communities for their perceived or actual affiliation with rival armed groups or as a deliberate attack against identity-based groups (see [S/2024/292](#)).

12. Under international humanitarian law, parties to conflicts must at all times distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects. Attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population is prohibited.¹² Yet in the past years there have been attacks on civilian infrastructure (places of worship, homes, schools, hospitals and other medical services) and also against critical infrastructure such as power and water plants (see [S/2024/385](#)). Such attacks ultimately increase the suffering of civilians by destroying livelihoods and depriving populations of access to essential goods and services. The use of civilians as human shields and attacks on protected civilian infrastructure may constitute war crimes.¹³

13. Cultural property, including movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of people, has been destroyed and violated as a deliberate strategy to eliminate the very foundations upon which the identity of those populations is based.¹⁴

14. Large-scale violence has resulted in a global crisis of forced displacement worldwide. By the end of 2023, an estimated 114 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, violence, human rights violations and abuses, and events seriously disturbing public order.¹⁵ As populations flee to urban areas, camps or camp-like settings, they are often subject to further violations and abuses, including sexual and gender-based violence, killings and aerial attacks by parties to conflicts.

15. Moreover, violence is resulting in human-made humanitarian crises, leading to record numbers of people at risk of death due to starvation, illness or lack of access to other essential goods and services around the world. According to the Global Report on Food Crisis 2024, in 2023 more than 134.5 million people experienced high

¹⁰ References to identity-based groups, protected groups, populations and minorities in the present report are used to designate any group of people sharing specific characteristics, such as ethnic, linguistic, religious, gender, political, belief or cultural practice characteristics. These shared characteristics distinguish them from the majority and may be used to label them (in their society) as “others” or “them”.

¹¹ United Nations, United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, May 2019.

¹² Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, 1977 (Protocol I).

¹³ International Committee of the Red Cross, “Rule 97: human shields”, International Humanitarian Law database. Available at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule97>.

¹⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Declaration concerning Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage, 17 October 2003; and International Criminal Court, Policy on Cultural Heritage, June 2023.

¹⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “UNHCR: forced displacement continues to grow as conflicts escalate”, 25 October 2023.

levels of acute food insecurity in countries experiencing armed conflict.¹⁶ Notably, in places where new conflicts broke out in 2023, there was a high risk of famine and starvation-related deaths.¹⁷ Several conflicts were marked by widespread and persistent constraints on humanitarian access, including attacks against humanitarian workers and critical infrastructure (see [S/2024/385](#)). Depriving civilians of objects indispensable to their survival, including through the instrumentalization of humanitarian aid encompassing relief supplies and access for responses to conflict-induced food insecurity in situations of armed conflict, may constitute a violation of international humanitarian law and may amount to war crimes (see Security Council resolution [2417 \(2018\)](#)).

B. Patterns in violations and abuses of human rights

16. Throughout history, atrocity crimes have often been precipitated by serious violations and abuses of human rights by State and non-State actors. Systematic violations of civil and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights and the civic space needed to protect and promote them, create an environment conducive to the commission of such crimes. These risks are heightened when paired with other exacerbating factors, such as the discrimination or exclusion of certain groups, that can create conditions that enable wider targeting of them and/or promote identity-based incitement and conflict. In addition, many human rights violations and abuses may themselves amount to an atrocity crime if certain thresholds or conditions are met.

17. Democratic backsliding and a pattern of targeted attacks by Governments against actual and perceived dissenting voices are increasing across the world.¹⁸ Political opponents, activists, human rights defenders, environmental activists and other members of civil society continue to be subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killing and other grave violations. Freedom of the press and media is too often compromised, and journalists are being targeted by State and non-State actors.¹⁹ In many countries around the world, peaceful protests have also been met by violent crackdowns using disproportionate force or are simply forbidden. There is a pervasive political environment with a sharp lean towards political extremism, populist rhetoric and increased levels of xenophobia that results in a growing acceptance of discriminatory policies and practices. Incendiary and divisive language is becoming more prevalent in the public discourse.

18. Women's and girls' rights have been regressing in several countries in a manner that also threatens their physical safety and integrity. Abduction, sexual slavery and forced marriage are used as part of the collective punishment of rival communities (see [A/78/172](#)). The past year saw a discernible increase in gender-based hate speech, gendered disinformation and incitement to violence, in which rape, threats of rape and other forms of sexual violence were used to humiliate and destabilize targeted communities and political opponents. Restrictive policies and practices perpetuate extreme forms of gender-based discrimination while repressive edicts and decrees

¹⁶ Food Security Information Network and Global Network against Food Crises, *Global Report on Food Crisis 2024* (Rome, 2024).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ UNESCO, *Journalism is a Public Good: World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development – Global Report 2021/2022* (Paris, 2022).

¹⁹ See [A/HRC/50/2](#). Notably, in 2021, the United Nations recorded 320 fatal attacks against human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists in 35 countries. Disturbingly, there was a 40 per cent increase in killings, with the highest number of human rights defenders murdered ever recorded, and a nearly 300 per cent increase in enforced disappearances from 2021 to 2022. See *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022* (United Nations publication, 2022).

targeting women and girls severely limit their freedom of movement, freedom of opinion and expression, employment opportunities, political participation and access to education and health care.

C. Environments conducive to atrocity crimes

19. Atrocity crimes are often preceded by structural, societal and political factors that create an enabling environment for their commission. They can take place in peace time and during armed conflict. The patterns enumerated above are often combined with or are a by-product of other dynamics within a society that create the conditions that heighten the risk of atrocity crimes. Some elements may facilitate crimes by creating means, motives and opportunities for perpetrators to act or may inhibit their mitigation. The enabling factors below are not exhaustive but are an indication of the main trends that are currently unfolding in different parts of the world.

20. Structural forms of discrimination against minority populations enable and drive grave violations of their rights. Discriminatory policies and practices, targeting populations on the basis of identity, including religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other forms of identity, such as political affiliation, may put populations at risk of atrocity crimes. Furthermore, extreme forms of discrimination can result in violence against identity-based groups and, at times, may create the conditions for their forcible displacement or transfer. In other instances, discriminatory policies and practices are implemented in a manner that assimilates diverse populations or a single group into the dominant culture or religion by force.

21. The continued criminalization and stigmatization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and intersex communities adds a distinct layer of vulnerability faced by these populations, notably in situations in which a high risk of atrocity crimes exist.

22. There is a concerning increase in threats and violent attacks against Indigenous Peoples, in particular in the context of large-scale projects involving infrastructure, extractive industries and agribusiness (see [A/77/238](#)). This may be inconsistent with rights enjoyed by Indigenous Peoples and tribal peoples under International Labour Organization Convention No. 169²⁰ and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (see General Assembly resolution [61/295](#)). Indigenous leaders are at times victims of enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killings, while their communities face threats of land dispossession and forced eviction in addition to judicial harassment, arbitrary arrests and detention, limitations on the freedom of expression and right of peaceful assembly, stigmatization, surveillance, travel bans and sexual harassment (see [A/77/238](#)).

23. Recent years have been marked by the unconstitutional or unlawful disruption of representative governance and democratic institutions in countries across multiple regions of the world (see General Assembly resolution [78/208](#)). The human rights situation can be particularly volatile in situations of unconstitutional changes of government, as a result of which serious human rights issues may arise, including arbitrary deprivation of life and liberty, removal of due process guarantees, widespread discrimination and the reversing of fragile progress on women's rights. Civic resistance to these unconstitutional changes has been met with a violent response, sometimes triggering new intra-State conflicts. At times, elections have

²⁰ International Labour Organization, Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (Convention No. 169), 1989.

reinvigorated societal divisions, which have contributed to instances in which election results have been violently contested and can serve as a trigger for wider conflict.

24. Democratic backsliding around the world is manifesting itself in the shrinking of civic space, the systematic weakening of judicial institutions and the increasing securitization of States. Societies in which the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression are curbed and political opposition, civil society organizations and independent media are targeted, including through routine and frequent Internet shutdowns, are more susceptible to risks of atrocity crimes. Judiciaries that have been deliberately stripped of their independence may cease to provide the necessary protection to populations from the excesses of the State when such protections are most needed.

25. As non-State armed actors are proliferating, their capacity to corrupt institutions and to control territory and populations increases, posing new challenges to State actors at the national and regional levels, in particular in situations in which violence spills across borders. In some contexts, criminal gangs fight for the control of neighbourhoods and urban territories. In areas that they control, non-State armed groups and gangs threaten populations through violence. In such cases, their actions may constitute crimes against humanity or violate international humanitarian law and constitute war crimes. Alongside territorial control, many of these actors compete to control, illegally exploit and smuggle natural resources as well as illicit drugs and controlled substances. The availability and proliferation of small arms and light weapons increases the capacity of such groups to perpetrate widespread abuses. In regions where the State capacity to counter the rise of armed groups is low, some communities have been forced to participate in self-defence or vigilante groups, leading to further weaponization of society and high levels of subnational violence.

26. Responses to the threats posed by non-State armed actors have been carried out by military force through counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency operations without, in some cases, due respect for the protection of civilians and human rights (see [A/77/718](#)). Sometimes, such interventions have led to the exacerbation of already fragile security situations. In some contexts, the misuse of counter-terrorism measures has led to discriminatory policies and practices, singling out specific groups from particular religious, ethnic or political backgrounds. These practices create an enabling environment for such groups to be demonized or targeted through hate crimes and other attacks.

27. New and emerging digital technologies are being misused by actors who have malicious intentions to violate the rights of populations and, in some instances, to stoke further divisions within society (see [A/HRC/53/45](#)). Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech can lead to violence in volatile societal and political contexts.²¹ While the spread of hate speech, xenophobia and disinformation are not new phenomena, social media platforms, messaging and other means of digital communication have enabled the exponential spread of content that disparages particular groups and may incite violence and targeting on the basis of identity. In some settings, disturbing trends of gender-based hate speech and incitement to violence have fuelled conflict, in which rape and other forms of sexual violence have been used to humiliate and destabilize communities. Where disaggregated data are available, approximately 70 per cent of persons targeted by online hate violence belong to minorities.²²

²¹ United Nations, "Our Common Agenda policy brief 8: information integrity on digital platforms", June 2023.

²² Including Roma, Dalits, persons of African descent, migrants and refugees. See [A/HRC/46/57](#).

28. The use of artificial intelligence, including predictive analytics, machine learning and data collection, has become more widespread in recent years. Methods of mass surveillance – through facial recognition, collection of biometric data and police checkpoints, among others – have been widely utilized by some government authorities against civil society and particular identity-based groups (see [A/78/520](#)). Predictive analytics and other forms of artificial intelligence are prone to reproducing and exacerbating biases, which may result in discriminatory policies based on factors such as ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation and nationality and contribute to an enabling environment for mass atrocities (see [A/HRC/53/45](#)).

29. Climate change is a risk multiplier and the defining challenge of the present time. The failure to confront climate change has already put many communities at risk as desertification, while the shrinking of agricultural resources and production, as well as extreme weather events, have diminished livelihoods, displaced communities and increased competition over limited resources.²³ As the impact of climate change continues to grow, these threats will be further compounded, increasing the vulnerability of populations and prompting migration to other areas and the risk of resource-based conflict.

30. While these patterns and trends, which are unprecedented in magnitude and complexity, are known, there is a lack of political will at the national, regional and multilateral levels to address them in a way that would protect populations by employing effective prevention. This expresses itself in the degradation of cooperation within the international system. Deadlocks within the Security Council have prevented it from effectively carrying out its duty to maintain international peace and security. Amid these tensions, the impression that double standards are being used is reinforcing mistrust among Member States.

III. Advances and challenges in preventing atrocity crimes and protecting populations

31. Protracted crises are far outpacing the capacity to respond through existing best practice or to implement new and innovative solutions. While acknowledging a collective failure to protect populations in too many cases, it is also important to point out that progress is being made in implementing the responsibility to protect. The present section focuses on advancements in prevention, protection and processes that promote human rights and accountability. It also reflects upon the numerous normative, conceptual and operational challenges that need to be addressed to improve the prevention of atrocity crimes and the protection of populations.

A. Advances in prevention and protection

32. In the past two decades, considerable progress has been made in understanding the risk factors, causes and dynamics that drive atrocity crimes. To enhance responsiveness to early warning signs, policymakers now have access to a wide range of tools and instruments designed to support early decision-making from an atrocity prevention and protection viewpoint.

33. Since the publication of the framework of analysis for atrocity crimes by the office of the Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect,²⁴ several thematic reports on the responsibility to protect have been produced to highlight additional variables for consideration, as well as

²³ See www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/human-security.

²⁴ United Nations, “Framework of analysis for atrocity crimes: a tool for prevention”, 2014.

means for collecting more nuanced early warning data and information on the vulnerability of particular populations.²⁵ The Peacebuilding Commission has also become an important platform for Member States to discuss important issues related to peacebuilding and prevention.²⁶

34. The Global Action against Mass Atrocity Crimes convenes more than 39 partner States and civil society organizations from all continents. It has made important strides in articulating national strategies for prevention, in particular through its Asia-Pacific and African working groups.²⁷ Furthermore, Member States have created national mechanisms aimed at preventing and responding to atrocity risks at the domestic level.²⁸ These bodies convene government officials and independent experts. They are mandated to produce early warnings, provide recommendations to relevant ministries and support policymakers in making decisions aligned with the responsibility to protect. They also cooperate with regional entities.²⁹ In addition, civil society organizations at the national, regional and international levels are providing expertise, as well as timely, actionable early warnings and recommendations for action, to stakeholders.³⁰

35. A number of international mechanisms, such as commissions of inquiry, fact-finding missions³¹ and other investigative bodies, have been created and mandated to assist in the collection, consolidation and preservation of evidence to facilitate fair and independent criminal proceedings and to share evidence and analysis with national and, as applicable, regional and international courts.³² These mechanisms may also be mandated to identify root causes of conflict or specific incidents and in some cases to identify perpetrators. While not created to initiate criminal prosecutions, they may serve as an important deterrent and may inhibit the potential commission of further atrocity crimes. Several of these mechanisms have acted preventively, issuing timely alerts utilizing the framework of analysis for atrocity crimes to highlight the relationship between structural factors, human rights abuses and the risk of atrocity crimes occurring (see, for example, [A/HRC/51/46](#)). This contributes to identifying possible measures to mitigate and address both immediate and future risks. The monitoring and advocacy of the United Nations High

²⁵ See www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/key-documents.shtml.

²⁶ United Nations, “Peacebuilding Commission”, brochure, June 2023.

²⁷ See <https://gaamac.org/who-we-are>.

²⁸ As part of the Protocol for the Prevention and the Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity and all forms of Discrimination of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, several States have established national committees for the prevention of atrocity crimes. The Government of Ghana, for example, has maintained a National Peace Council since 2011.

²⁹ Such as the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (<https://au.int/en/psc>), the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (<https://icglr.org/genocide-prevention-committee>) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (<https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/rules-based-people-oriented-people-centred/human-rights>). See also European Union, “EU responsibility to protect – atrocity prevention toolkit”, September 2018; and Jared Genser, *The Responsibility to Protect and the Organization of American States: A Path Forward for Atrocity Prevention and Response* (Washington, D.C., Organization of American States, 2022).

³⁰ Global Action against Mass Atrocity Crimes, *Training Toolkit: Establishing and Managing National Mechanism for Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Geneva, 2021).

³¹ United Nations and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions on International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law: Guidance and Practice* (New York and Geneva, 2015).

³² United Nations Library and Archives Geneva, “Mandating authority”, International Commissions of Inquiry, Fact-finding Missions database. Available at <https://libraryresources.unog.ch/c.php?g=462695&p=3162812>.

Commissioner for Human Rights under General Assembly resolution 48/141 also plays a crucial role in this respect.

36. The willingness of multiple Member States to hold perpetrators of atrocity crimes accountable has also led to accountability through cases brought under the principles of extraterritorial and/or universal jurisdiction.

37. Since the principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity were presented to the Human Rights Council (see E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/20), progress has been achieved in their implementation to support societies that are dealing with the legacy of mass atrocities. Transitional justice strategies that are holistic in their approach can contribute to a broad societal consensus that acknowledges the patterns of atrocities committed and develops retributive and restorative justice mechanisms to address their consequences, and can provide for the institutional reforms necessary to prevent their reoccurrence. Memorialization initiatives can play an important role in this process by drawing a strong line between the past and the present to counter denial and revisionism and to strengthen prevention by educating new generations. The joint study of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence and the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide is also an important milestone in the understanding of atrocity crimes prevention (see A/HRC/37/65).

38. Some Member States have recently acknowledged responsibility and expressed public apologies for serious violations, sometimes amounting to atrocities, committed against aboriginal peoples, First Nations or minorities.³³ These apologies have been accompanied by reparation programmes, the revision of history books or new laws to better uphold State responsibilities, or a combination thereof.

39. The International Court of Justice is playing a critical role by adjudicating disputes between States concerning the interpretation and application of the Genocide Convention and other relevant treaties, notably human rights treaties. Pursuant to the Charter and to the Statute of the Court, decisions of the Court are binding upon the parties concerned (see art. 94 of the Charter).

40. Landmark cases before national courts and international criminal courts and tribunals have contributed to holding perpetrators of atrocity crimes accountable, developed important jurisprudence and generated further knowledge about the nature of atrocity crimes and the manner in which they are committed,³⁴ such as the use of child soldiers,³⁵ sexual violence in conflict³⁶ and attacks on cultural heritage sites, among others.³⁷

B. Further challenges in prevention and protection

41. The advances outlined above are a small reflection of the actions that have been taken by Member States, the United Nations, local communities and civil society to assess and address the threat of atrocity crimes, both before such crimes are

³³ See, for example, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Finland, Norway and Canada, as well as the Truth Commission in Sweden and the Yoorrook Justice Commission in Australia.

³⁴ This includes, for example, the work done by the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace in Colombia.

³⁵ See for example, International Criminal Court, *The Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen*, Case No. ICC-02/04-01/15, February 2021.

³⁶ See, for example, www.icty.org/en/features/crimes-sexual-violence/landmark-cases.

³⁷ See, for example, International Criminal Court, *The Prosecutor v. Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi*, Case No. ICC-01/12-01/15, April 2024.

committed and in their aftermath. They highlight the availability of relevant information on risks, the existing potential to prevent their occurrence and the available institutional capacity to protect vulnerable populations and to hold perpetrators of atrocity crimes accountable. Despite these advances, the international community has been unable to prevent the commission of atrocity crimes in a number of critical cases.

42. The problem is not the commitment to the responsibility to protect in itself, but rather what the concrete implementation of that commitment entails in practice. Four critical challenges in this respect are set out below.

43. First, the prevention of atrocity should begin well before risk factors emerge. It requires an initial decision to commit to prevention, followed by systematic research, the formulation of policies and the development of practices and structures. The purpose is to recognize patterns, identify risk factors and indicators and inform policymakers about how to promote societal resilience to atrocity crimes in the first place. Based on these assessments, policymakers might enact new laws or take other initiatives to protect the rights of vulnerable populations, prevent their marginalization, inhibit the development of drivers of direct violence and discourage perpetrators from acting. Unfortunately, these efforts are not consistently taken.

44. A second challenge is related to the particular nature of atrocity crimes. The way in which available information is assessed matters a great deal, given the patterns of behaviour, action and intent involved in genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (see [A/63/677](#)). These patterns are often not acknowledged. Moreover, the failure to take early warning signals seriously, namely to anticipate that early warning signals will really translate into the commission of crimes, or the overestimation of the impact of mitigation strategies may result in the rejection of timely decision-making and action aimed at preventing atrocity crimes (see [A/73/898-S/2019/463](#), [A/72/884-S/2018/525](#) and [A/71/1016-S/2017/556](#)). The combination of all these factors inhibits thinking on the most effective strategies needed to build resilience and deploy appropriate protection means. A better understanding of the nature of atrocity crimes could strengthen political will and contribute to a larger consensus for early engagement in prevention and protection.

45. Third, discussions about the risk of an impending atrocity often take place much too late, when the level of polarization and violence is already so high that consensus-building becomes difficult. The problem is the lack of timely acknowledgement followed by prompt decisions and the appropriately leveraged reaction at the national, regional and international levels.

46. Fourth, even when the risks are understood or clearly articulated, priority is not sufficiently given to the protection of vulnerable groups. This includes the funding and expertise required to develop adequate and appropriate protection measures adapted to each situation and acceptable to the affected groups. Furthermore, the collective responsibility to protect populations from mass atrocities is an inclusive principle. A continued effort is also required to ensure that the knowledge and expertise of those who face or are most proximate to genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes are centred in policy, practice and understanding. In the absence of the above, responses may fall short of effectively protecting vulnerable populations or may expose them to even greater vulnerability.

IV. Understanding effective prevention and protection

47. To be successful, atrocity prevention should be approached as a continuous endeavour. This entails the identification of risk factors and indicators that might

enable the commission of atrocities in the short- and long-term. It also includes the conduct of regular assessments of existing and emerging new dynamics to enable stakeholders to better understand what is at stake and what can be done and to take coherent policy decisions aimed at reducing the probability of these events occurring and strengthening the protection of populations.

A. Prevention as a continuous process

48. History reveals that no society is immune to mass atrocities. The most efficient prevention focuses on recognizing risk factors and indicators as patterns in the context in which they arise and addressing them, when necessary, in conjunction with regional and international efforts. The best way to counteract the actions that lead to atrocity crimes is to approach prevention and protection as part of a continuous process and to put an architecture in place that includes structures, policies and practices.

49. In this regard, the field of public health provides an important model when designing prevention policies to anticipate and address the potential risk of atrocity crimes. Public health prevention is a dynamic enterprise that relies on layers of surveillance and reporting (derived from years of learning from experience) to intervene early in order to avert worst case scenarios. It is linked to a bureaucratic and scientific network that can be mobilized to take appropriate and calibrated preventive action and, if need be, to intervene at escalating capacity and scope to avert widespread harm to populations. The fundamental strength of public health prevention is that it mobilizes experience into pattern recognition so that, when necessary, intervention measures and protection strategies can be employed.

50. Similarly, the ongoing task of prevention should become part of what is commonly accepted as the practice of good governance and the rule of law. Regular assessment and detection of risks contribute to a political space that promotes tolerance and dialogue. For example, one of the most important challenges is the constructive management of diversity. Many initiatives now exist to protect the rights of minority populations, such as laws and educational programmes, awareness-raising campaigns, initiatives to counter hate speech or gender violence, specific training for security forces, local mediation initiatives and the expanding representation of diverse groups within positions of power. These measures have significantly contributed to halting processes of stigmatization or discrimination and strengthened the protection of such groups.

51. Furthermore, as societies are constantly changing and evolving, with transformation driven by both internal and external factors, vulnerabilities and threats are also in constant transformation. Accordingly, an important feature of atrocity prevention is its ability to adapt its assessments to this ongoing evolution and to propose measures adequate to the changing conditions. This, in turn, will strengthen the resilience of society and the capacity of States to fulfil their obligations, in particular towards minorities and other vulnerable groups.

52. When risks are emerging, the architecture of prevention is capable of acknowledging patterns and can propose timely adjustments to avert the escalation of violence, deter the commission of atrocity crimes and deploy protection measures. In such cases, public messages to promote tolerance can be issued, countering disinformation or hate speech, or mediation initiatives and other measures deterring perpetrators from acting may be deployed.

53. In the aftermath of atrocities, prevention efforts should start again and efforts should be renewed to strengthen the capacity of the State to fulfil its duty towards all persons within its jurisdiction, to ensure the safety of vulnerable communities and, along with civil society, to rebuild trust within society at large.

B. A unique framework for atrocity crimes prevention

54. Prevention through the responsibility to protect is unique from other forms of prevention because it enables the analysis of actions, events and the ensuing dynamics and patterns that make up the nature of atrocity crimes in any given context. This conceptualization, or lens, for atrocity prevention recognizes patterns of behaviour and dynamics that might enable or precede atrocity crimes. Taken as a whole, this prevention framework can also assist in identifying particular vulnerabilities of certain populations – including ethnic and religious minorities, women, persons of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, children, persons with disabilities and others – to atrocity crimes and to detect factors that may put them at particular risk. On this basis, preventive and corrective measures could be proposed and actions taken to protect vulnerable groups that are determined to be at risk for atrocity crimes.

55. An atrocity prevention lens grounded in the responsibility to protect may therefore represent an added value to existing entities dealing with conflict prevention, conflict resolution or humanitarian protection. For example, more than 110 national human rights institutions already exist.³⁸ In some contexts, entities mandated to promote peaceful settlements of conflict have also been established. In both cases, the integration of such a framework for atrocity crimes prevention into their ongoing work could support the implementation of the responsibility to protect under pillar one, at the domestic level, without major additional investments. It could also help to reinforce the subsidiary nature of pillars two and three under the responsibility to protect.³⁹

56. Lasting, sustainable peace can be achieved only through political solutions, grounded in respect for human rights. Consideration of an atrocity prevention framework or lens can assist decision makers to devise adequate political strategies to counter threats and avoid actions that may exacerbate societal cleavages, structural exclusion or violence among groups. Through a more tailored comprehension of the broader political landscape and how it specifically relates to the threat to populations at risk, stakeholders can understand better what factors in the political process may act as triggers for wider violence or atrocities and what actions by State and non-State actors may exacerbate vulnerabilities faced by certain populations or regions of the country.

C. Prevention and protection: a cooperative effort

57. Effective protection is the result of solid prevention assessments. Prevention brings knowledge and comparative evidence to the forecasting of dynamics that enable the commission of atrocities. Protection identifies aims and deploys concrete mechanisms to safeguard communities and institutions. Prevention and protection are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. Informed by prevention assessments, protection strategies are well equipped to reduce exposure to threats, respond quickly and efficiently in coordinated ways and with sufficient means to save lives, notably of the most vulnerable groups, and meet their basic survival needs. Protective measures need to be ready for deployment in cases in which crisis prevention efforts fail and a crisis unfolds.

³⁸ See <https://ganhri.org> and www.ohchr.org/en/countries/nhri.

³⁹ The report of the Secretary-General on implementing the responsibility to protect (A/63/677) contains a detailed discussion of the three pillars: the protection responsibilities of the State (pillar one); international assistance and capacity-building (pillar two); and timely and decisive response (pillar three).

D. Multiple forms of protection in action

58. Protection can assume many mutually complementary forms, including measures taken in the legal, physical and humanitarian fields. Protection means and actions are necessary during peaceful and turbulent times, during armed conflicts and in the aftermath of conflicts. Given its linkage with prevention, protection also requires a continuous process of analysis, review and reporting on evolving situations and their impact on the vulnerabilities of populations, in order to inform decision-making on how to effectively respond and protect.

59. In the United Nations, various entities undertake monitoring, reporting and advocacy tasks within their respective mandates that are important for protection.⁴⁰ Analysis by independent human rights institutions and security services, as well as information provided by human rights defenders, civil society and independent media, also play a critical role in documenting and drawing attention to violations and abuses of human rights, threats to the physical integrity of populations and patterns in attacks. As mentioned above, the ongoing use of an atrocity prevention lens will ensure that the needs of specific vulnerable or identity-based groups are identified, understood and prioritized in the design of the protection strategies.

Legal protection

60. The legal guarantee of protection provided by applicable international law lies at the heart of the prevention and protection of atrocity crimes. This includes the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and international humanitarian law. Domestic legal frameworks should be designed in a manner that protects all populations by ensuring equal access to public services and full human rights protections. The atrocity prevention lens helps in identifying underlying vulnerabilities of specific groups that can be addressed or corrected through enhanced legal protections. In the context of armed conflict, legal protection is afforded to the population through compliance by parties engaged in armed conflicts with international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, as applicable. Obligations to uphold international humanitarian law are also applicable to occupying powers and non-State organized armed groups. Other States or States parties to these treaties, as well as the United Nations, can contribute to effective respect for the treaties by recalling applicable obligations and reminding the States in question of their obligations under the respective treaties, and take the steps necessary to halt and protect by issuing formal complaints in cases of non-compliance with those treaties.

Preventive diplomacy, good offices and mediation

61. Preventive diplomacy, good offices and mediation efforts are aimed at reducing tensions, averting violent escalations and facilitating agreements among parties to conflicts. These efforts are at the forefront of prevention and long-term protection efforts. Joint problem-solving processes and initiatives to dissuade potential perpetrators from committing atrocities have had a clear deterrent effect.⁴¹

⁴⁰ OHCHR, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and special political missions, among others.

⁴¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “A strategic framework for helping prevent mass atrocities”, September 2023.

62. Such efforts by third parties, including States, international, regional and subregional organizations and other relevant stakeholders, are often the most significant steps in changing the path of a particular crisis. They have prompted conflicting parties to step back from violent rhetoric and escalating abuses, make political commitments to halt abuses and rethink the tactics being utilized in civilian spaces. It is crucial that such initiatives be inclusive, integrate an intersectional perspective throughout and foster women's political participation. As outlined in A New Agenda for Peace, at a time of major power deterioration and new risks for increased inter-State conflict, good offices can play a crucial role in mitigating tensions and bridge differences between recalcitrant parties.⁴²

63. Domestic actors such as local community and religious leaders, civil society activists and women's and youth groups are playing a crucial role in de-escalating situations and engendering dialogue between warring parties or groups. They should be seen as the front-line actors of preventive diplomacy and receive the support needed from the international community, including training in atrocity prevention.

Physical protection

64. A security sector that is community-based and respects international norms and standards on prevention for all is one of the most important actors in ensuring the physical protection of populations from atrocity crimes. An awareness of atrocity dynamics and risks can assist security forces in understanding potential triggers for violence – such as incitement or episodes of physical violence against particular vulnerable groups – as well as how to address the protection needs of such groups.

65. At the regional and international levels, the United Nations, regional organizations or Member States, if authorized by the Security Council, by a relevant regional body or with the consent of the host State to do so, can deploy armed military or police forces to act as a deterrent and, if necessary, ensure the physical safety of the civilian population.⁴³

66. As stated in paragraph 139 of the World Summit Outcome, Chapter VII measures are a critical aspect of the responsibility to protect and should be used in a timely and decisive manner when peaceful means are inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. However, crises and situations in which atrocity crimes are unfolding have become more complex. In some scenarios, authorization of the use of force may not necessarily prevent further atrocity crimes and might also endanger the population. Additional options for providing physical protection to populations should therefore be explored and considered.

Humanitarian aid and humanitarian protection

67. Many of the situations in which atrocity crimes are ongoing today have resulted in dire human-made humanitarian emergencies as populations flee en masse internally within borders or across borders. In too many cases, the physical infrastructure for food, sanitation and health, whether in urban areas or camps, has been deliberately destroyed or blocked. Parties to conflicts and crises, including both State and non-State actors, often obstruct or politicize the provision of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian actors must be protected and must never be targeted by parties to the conflict. It is essential for the protection of civilians that humanitarian actors are provided with access to all populations, including those in conflict areas, and that

⁴² United Nations, "Our Common Agenda policy brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace", July 2023.

⁴³ See <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/protection-of-civilians-mandate>.

there is accountability for any actor that blocks or diverts aid. Effective protection relies upon the collective efforts of the humanitarian community to put a priority on protection by addressing risks and threats, including violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. Furthermore, there is a growing recognition of the importance of drawing up a comprehensive plan to provide an integrated framework to bridge the divide between humanitarian relief, development assistance and peacebuilding. Wherever needed, this continuum is key to addressing root causes of violence, promoting lasting societal transformation and advancing the protection of groups that remain vulnerable.

V. Upholding the responsibility to protect: conclusion and the way forward

68. The commitment to the underlying demand of the responsibility to protect continues to be that no matter where atrocity crimes occur, no matter who is responsible for committing them and for whatever reason they are committed, the international community must always oppose such acts and protect populations from their effects. The failure to uphold this commitment degrades the credibility of the multilateral system and erodes trust in its capacity to effectively safeguard humanity.

69. The year 2025 will mark the twentieth anniversary of the adoption by the General Assembly of its commitment to the responsibility to protect. It is a timely opportunity to emphasize the need to produce more tangible results in preventing atrocities and protecting populations. In this regard, the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect will provide key contributions to help with taking stock of successes, challenges and lessons learned over the past two decades of experience and with assessing how to implement the responsibility to protect more effectively and consistently.

70. I encourage Member States, regional bodies and United Nations entities to assess and further develop, as appropriate, their own capacities to prevent mass atrocities. To engender hope for the future, people must feel secure and protected from violence and atrocities in a deeply troubled world. Together we can decide to fulfil this profound commitment of the responsibility to protect.
