

Side Event to the

75th Anniversary of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

“The Role of Religious Communities in Upholding and Implementing the Genocide Convention”

Tuesday, 28 November 2023, ECOSOC Chamber, UNHQs, New York

CONCEPT NOTE

Background information

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was the first human rights treaty adopted by the General Assembly on 9 December 1948 in the wake of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Raphael Lemkin, the Polish lawyer who first coined the word “genocide” in his 1944 book *“Axis Rule in Occupied Europe”*, combined the words *geno* from the Greek word for race or tribe with *cide*, derived from the Latin word for killing.

The Convention establishes on States Parties a twofold obligation: to prevent and to punish the crime of genocide, including by enacting relevant legislation and punishing perpetrators. These obligations, as well as the obligation not to commit genocide, have been recognized as customary international law and, as a result, apply to all States regardless of ratification of the Convention. From the **prevention** perspective, through its domestication and implementation at the national level, the Convention has provided a framework for the adoption of legal, regulatory, and operational measures to support genocide prevention efforts. Moreover, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has decided that “the obligation to prevent the commission of the crime of genocide is imposed by the Genocide Convention on any State party which, in a given situation, has it in its power to contribute to restraining in any degree the commission of genocide”.¹

2023 marks the 75th anniversary of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. In this context, the United Nations Office on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect (UNOSAPG) will organize an event titled *“A Living Force in World Society: The Legacy of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the*

¹ *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v Serbia and Montenegro) (Merits)* [2007] ICJ Rep 43.

Crime of Genocide” on 8 December at the United Nations headquarters in New York. The event will seek to highlight the legacy and impact of the Genocide Convention through practical examples of how it has been utilized at national, regional, and international levels since its adoption to support the prevention of and accountability for the crime of genocide. It will also highlight the challenges that remain in the prevention of genocide and showcase champions of prevention, including civil society, survivors’ groups and other actors working tirelessly to promote the objectives set out in the Convention.

Religious leaders and faith-based organizations across all faiths are key partners for relevant United Nations entities in advancing the United Nations’ principles and values, and in implementing the work of the organization under its three pillars, namely peace and security, human rights and sustainable development. With the surge in violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism and religious intolerance in many societies and across faiths, religious leaders and faith-based organizations have an important role to play in preventing the instrumentalization of religious beliefs and promoting respect for all faiths. More specific to the prevention of genocide and other atrocity crimes, religious communities have a pivotal role in fostering peaceful, inclusive and just societies. In this context, since 1948, scores of religious leaders and actors have been tirelessly championing the Genocide Convention, advocating for its ratification, domestication, and implementation to make sure that genocide is not committed again.

Recognizing the valuable role of religious leaders and actors, including women and youth, in promoting peace and preventing conflicts, in 2017, UNOSAPG launched the first-ever *Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes*, also known as the Fez Plan of Action. This Plan includes a rich and broad range of recommendations on ways in which religious leaders and actors can prevent incitement to violence and hence contribute to preventing genocide and other atrocity crimes. Two years later, in September 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General launched the *United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites: In Unity and Solidarity for Safe and Peaceful Worship*, implemented in coordination with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC). The Plan provides concrete recommendations to support Member States and non-state actors in their efforts to ensure that religious sites are safe, that worshipers can observe their rituals in peace, and that the values of compassion and mutual respect are fostered globally. The Plan is anchored in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and re-enforces the notion that religious sites are powerful symbols of our collective consciousness. Both Plans of Action recognize the pivotal role religious leaders and faith actors play in upholding the values and principles of the Genocide Convention, in particular, at the community level.

In the lead up to the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, UNOSAPG and UNAOC are organising a side event on the role of religious communities in upholding and implementing the Genocide Convention. The event aims at showcasing stories of religious individuals, faith actors and groups that have been promoting, protecting and implementing the Genocide Convention. Religious leaders and faith actors will be invited to share their stories and provide insights about how the legacy of the Convention can be enhanced and the role of religious communities in this regard.

Purpose

The event aims to showcase the role of religious leaders and faith actors in upholding and implementing the values and principles of the 1948 Genocide Convention.

Outcome

Increased awareness about the contribution and the role of religious leaders and faith actors in protecting and implementing the Genocide Convention, as well as their support of the prevention activities of the United Nations, including prevention of genocide and other atrocity crimes at the community and global levels.

Output

A summary of key highlights and case studies shared by religious leaders and faith actors on their work in upholding the Genocide Convention. The summary will be developed with the support of the Multi-faith Advisory Council to the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development, composed of diverse faith-based organizations across all faiths.

Audience

Permanent Missions of Member States to the United Nations in New York, Observers to the United Nations, lay and religious communities, civil society, academics and United Nations entities.

Format

Interactive panel discussion in person, broadcast live by UN Web TV.

Organizers

The implementing United Nations entities of the side event to the 75th anniversary of the Genocide Convention are UNOSAPG and UNAOC.

Since 2020, UNOSAPG and UNAOC have been co-chairs of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development (IATF). The IATF is a platform for knowledge exchange and management, capacity building and system-wide guidance on engagement with the religious community. The IATF has grown considerably over the past years and currently brings together 27 United Nations entities from across the system that meet on a regular basis. During the period of January 2023 – December 2025, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, human rights protection, peace and security agenda, and sustainable development remain thematic priorities of the IATF coordination efforts.

UNOSAPG is responsible for advancing national, regional and international efforts to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing (atrocities crimes) as well as their incitement. The Office alerts relevant actors, including the Secretary-General and the intergovernmental bodies of the United Nations, to situations where there is a risk of genocide and related atrocity crimes and mobilizes the international community to prevent or halt these crimes. It works to enhance prevention, early warning and response capacity of the United Nations, Member States, regional organizations and civil society through training and technical assistance. UNOSAPG supports the normative development of genocide prevention through further conceptual refinement, research and collaboration with academic and other civil society actors.

UNAOC serves as a soft-power political tool of the Secretary-General for conflict prevention and conflict resolution. It aims to improve understanding and cooperation among nations and peoples across cultures and to reduce polarization. It helps develop more inclusive societies, in which diversity is experienced as an asset. UNAOC was launched in July 2005 by the former United Nations Secretary-General, H.E. Mr. Kofi Annan, as the initiative, intended to respond to the need for a committed effort by the international community – both at the institutional and civil society levels – to bridge divides and overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions and polarization which potentially threaten world peace. The special status and mandate of UNAOC have been recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolutions 64/14 of 10 November 2009 and 69/312 of 6 July 2015.