

Statement at the Voksenaasen dialogue conference on the unpredictable past and future of Genocide

The following statement is the result of joint efforts by participants at the conference on Genocide 16 -17 November 2007 in Oslo, Norway, organised by Voksenaasen Culture Centre; the Dag Hammarskjold Peace Centre at Mindolo, Zambia; Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden, and Networkers SouthNorth.

The themes of genocide and mass violence approached in the statement are complex, with a wide range of stories and histories, acting groups, forces and scenarios, vested interests and lots of room for getting lost in controversy and conflict. In short, both the understanding of the past as well as expectations for the future of genocide are unpredictable. And we are reminded of the "Never forget" of the many Holocaust memorials, as well as of Harold Pinter's Nobel address: "But it never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening, it wasn't really happening. It didn't matter. It was of no interest!"

The contributors to the conference are well schooled or experienced in the theme and content of genocide, as academics, activists or politicians

The focus for the conference was primarily on, but not limited to, Africa. The speakers were invited to respond to broadly sketched themes identified through preparatory talks, including

- * Are there specific Northern and Southern perspectives on the theme of Genocide? And what are the ramifications of the answer to that question?
- * Have we forgotten the role of the colonizer, blacked out crucial parts of the history of genocide, or even hidden it deliberately?
- * Can the history of genocide be distilled and converted into lessons learnt?
- * What is the role of hegemonic powers or collective efforts in creating new options for peace and development in the wake of genocide?
- * Beyond vested interests, vengeance and sacrifice in the history of genocide: how can we develop effective mechanisms for prevention, based on insight and hope.
- * What are the burning issues of today?

In addition to the attached statement itself a separate report will be produced.

Key-note speakers:

Hassan Abubakar Jallow, chief prosecutor UN Criminal Court Rwanda
Jan Egeland, director NUPI, former UN Deputy Secretary-General, Norway
Charles Abugre, head of policy, Christian Aid, UK and Ghana
Alejandro Bandaña, director CEI, Nicaragua
Henning Melber, director DHF, Sweden

Other speakers:

Former President Kenneth D. Kaunda, Zambia; Dr. Alex Obote, Uganda; Amb. Ragnar Ångby, Sweden; Amb. Bernt H. Lund, Norway; Dr. Joyce Apsel, USA; Dir. Emily Zikazwe, Zambia; Amb. Michael Sahlin, Sweden; Dir. Jimmy Mulanda Juma, Congo; Dr. Bernt Hagtvet, Norway; Editor Arne Ruth, Sweden; Dir. Gunnar Sørboe, Norway; Dr. Ingrid Samset, Norway.

The Voksenaasen Statement

Genocides and other mass atrocities are consequences of complex political actions not, as they are often characterised, as simply senseless slaughter based mainly on identity or cultural difference. This means that besides the humanitarian actions to stop or minimise killings, torture and rape of civilians, especially women and children, the crucial challenge to managing or solving them requires political solutions, rooted in participation of all affected persons, truth, power restructuring and reconciliation.

Strengthening multilateral processes, codified by such norms as human rights and the responsibility to protect adopted as universally applicable standards and norms by all members of the United Nations is an obvious avenue to be pursued further. In strengthening, implementing and protecting these normative goals guiding political practice, however, policies must avoid abuse by hegemonic interests of those exerting the power of definition over others for their own interests. The only hegemony acceptable is the hegemony of human rights based ideals serving all people of this world as human beings in their equal and undivided rights.

It also requires support for preventative actions, starting from the community levels, involving all affected persons (including internally displaced persons and refugees and women in particular), in peace building and peace strengthening initiatives and capacity for early warning.

Such an approach also requires to (self-)critically reflect on processes, which since centuries have divided this world and its societies in haves and have nots, often based on violent expansion and coercion, exploitation and institutionalisation of structures of inequality between people and between societies. This requires further sensitisation towards other forms of physical as well as structural violence, often resulting in forms of mass violence and killings beyond the numbers of victims in direct action from genocide or other codified forms of violations of fundamental human rights. To protect the right to a decent living requires an expansion of the notions and categories seeking to address injustice.

This dialogue conference was a first, initial step towards further reflections and explorations concerning the complexities of the matter. We intend to continue the painful path into investigating ourselves and the challenges we and others are facing to more adequately respond to the ever growing numbers of victims of global, regional and local injustices committed. We will consider putting together a working group on the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities, in line with the UN Declaration on the Responsibility to protect signed up by most governments of the world in 2005.

Oslo 17. November 2007