



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **Mass Atrocities Prevention I**

**February 6, 2018**

**10:30 – 12:00 PM**

**2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good morning and welcome to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on the prevention of mass atrocities. Today’s hearing is the first in a series of hearings the Commission will hold during the second session of the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, to more fully explore the serious issues of mass atrocities and how to prevent them. We are joined today by a distinguished panel of witnesses, and I want to thank each of them for their presence and the important work they do.

“Mass atrocities” are defined as large-scale, deliberate attacks against civilian populations. They include genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing.

After the Holocaust – the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews and members of other persecuted groups by the Nazi regime and its collaborators between 1941 and 1945 – the United States and international community vowed to “never again” stand by in the face of genocide.

But since then mass atrocities, including genocide, have been committed in Indonesia, Cambodia, Guatemala, East Timor, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sudan and South Sudan, among other places.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, tortured, disappeared or suffered sexual violence; and millions more have been forced to flee, with profound humanitarian, political, and national security consequences.

I don't believe the world's failure to prevent atrocities is because no one cares. In this era of instant communication powered by social media, most people I know have seen and passionately condemned the ongoing atrocities in Syria and elsewhere.

Nor is it because no one knew. To take just one example: many credible observers, including the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum testifying today, have been warning for years about the potential for genocide against the Rohingya in Burma.

The problem is that the international community, including the United States, has not been effective in turning knowledge and moral indignation into action to prevent a situation from worsening.

This is not a new or unrecognized problem. Both for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, preventing genocide and mass atrocities were national security priorities. And I think most of us view the Atrocities Prevention Board set up in 2012 as an important step forward. But clearly more is needed.

Back in 2008 former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Secretary of Defense William Cohen led the bipartisan Genocide Prevention Task Force that produced a blueprint for U.S. policymakers on preventing genocide. One of the recommendations was that the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, which had just been established, should make preventing genocide and mass atrocities a central focus of its work.

And we have certainly attempted to honor that mandate: over the years, the Commission has drawn attention to many situations where atrocities were occurring, or at risk of occurring, including Sudan, Sri Lanka, Syria and Burma, to name but a few.

It is because we have been paying attention that we share the deep frustration that "never again" has become "yet again." We are convinced that we can and must do better.

So during 2018 we will conduct this series of hearings to review the tools available to U.S. policymakers to prevent mass atrocities, and investigate how to strengthen them.

We do this recognizing that there is a lot of good work already underway in both chambers of Congress, and on both sides of the aisle, to find new ways forward. I especially want to highlight *H.R. 3030, The Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017*, led by Rep. Ann Wagner and cosponsored by both Commission Co-Chairs, myself and Congressman Hultgren.

There is also a lot of good, thoughtful research and analysis that we can all draw on. Our witnesses today are deeply familiar with that work, and we look forward to hearing their reflections.

I want to close by noting where we are starting from.

We are distinguishing between preventing *armed conflict* and preventing *atrocities*. We know that armed conflict often enables mass atrocities, but not all armed conflicts lead to atrocities, and atrocities also occur frequently in the absence of armed conflict – cases of state-directed suppression, communal violence or post-war retribution.

We are persuaded that atrocities are not the product of “ancient” ethnic or religious hatreds but rather of conscious, strategic decisions by ruling elites and non-state actors to achieve specific ends. Those actors need a reason to commit atrocities, and the means and opportunity to do so. The issue becomes how to change their strategic calculus.

We think impunity is one of the elements in that strategic calculus. If the perpetrators enjoy impunity, this may be seen as a “green light” to expand a genocidal or mass atrocity campaign.

We think there are patterns of behavior that should always raise red flags. Classifying people into “us” and “them,” dehumanizing and discriminating against whole populations, polarizing one population against another – these are processes and actions that lay the groundwork for violence.

We do not think that there is a one-size-fits-all approach. Prevention strategies must be tailored to each situation and should make use of the full range of tools policymakers have.

What might be that full range of tools? In these hearings, we will be looking at the role of diplomacy and foreign aid, accountability, military engagement, and economic incentives and penalties. We will also explore why coordination by the whole of government is important.

We do not discount the role of political will. But we are looking for ways to reduce its weight – to institutionalize an “atrocities prevention lens” so we don’t wait until it’s so late and the problem is so big that all we can do is lament the immorality, the inhumanity, and then provide humanitarian aid to the victims and survivors.

Mass atrocities are human rights violations on a grand scale. We invite you to join us this year in identifying new strategies to prevent them from occurring.