

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Reducing the Risk of Mass Atrocities

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Testimony to the House of Representatives Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Peace Direct

Chairman McGovern and Chairman Hultgren, Members of Congress, congressional staff, colleagues, on behalf of Peace Direct, I want to thank you for the invitation to speak to you today as part of this important and timely hearing on preventing mass atrocities.

Each year, indiscriminate killings and mass violence devastate communities around the globe and take the lives of thousands of innocent children, women, and men. While the large majority of mass atrocities occur within the context of ongoing wars, such attacks can also occur outside the context of armed conflict, in repressive societies with abusive governments or fragile states with poor governance and little accountability for human rights violations. Mass killings of innocent civilians can even occur in our own country, as we have tragically seen again recently. Reducing the risks of mass atrocities is thus an urgent challenge that should seize us all and in which this body has a particularly important role to play.

I am honored today to speak with you about our experience and understanding of what works to prevent mass atrocities, and particularly about what we have learned through Peace Direct's fifteen years of supporting and partnering with local people on the frontlines of violent conflict. For those of you who may not know Peace Direct, we are a non-profit international non-governmental organization working with local people to stop violent conflict and build lasting peace around the world. We are headquartered in London with a small office here in Washington, DC. We work directly with local grassroots peacebuilding organizations in 12 conflict-affected countries, and we conduct research and advocacy on local peacebuilding. We believe, and our experience confirms again and again, that local people are the experts on the problems they face and that they are best suited to develop the solutions their communities need.

Unlike many large international organizations, we do not design or implement programs from the outside. Rather, we seek out local people already doing heroic work to interrupt violence and foster peace in their communities in some of the most dangerous war zones around the world – places like Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. We support these local peacebuilders and their

communities to develop, expand, and increase the impact of their work, strengthening local resilience to violence and helping reduce the risks of future violence.

Although the focus of news reporting on conflict is often on governments and armed groups engaged in the violence, we have never failed to find remarkable civil society organizations, associations, informal networks, and individual leaders organizing at the community level, even in the midst of horrific violence, to stop violence and build peace in every conflict zone around the world.

One of our strategies is to conduct mappings of civil society peacebuilding capacity in conflict-affected countries, some of which is published on our website www.peaceinsight.org. These mappings prove that a far greater local peacebuilding capacity exists than the international community is aware of or engages with. In recent mapping exercises in Mali and Eastern DRC, most civil society organizations had not received any external support and were operating well below the field of vision of most donors and policymakers. For instance, just in South and North Kivu in Eastern Congo, an initial mapping exercise that we commissioned identified 271 local organizations actively working on peacebuilding, 270 of whom are interested in scaling up their efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants into their communities.

We believe these local peacebuilders are a critical missing link in the world's efforts to prevent mass atrocities and the most untapped resource for peacebuilding globally. Some key capacities and advantages that local actors have are:

- A deep understanding of culture, history and context for interpreting and responding to early warning signs and access to critical information in real time.
- The trust of local communities to address the earliest stages of conflict, engage in reconciliation, and mitigate the risk of atrocities.
- Local knowledge to develop self-protection strategies and prevent gender-based violence.
- Insight into weak governance institutions and how to address gaps, improve accountability, and strengthen state-society relations.

Local peacebuilders are leading in preventive efforts to build resilience and address root causes of mass atrocities. They are often the “canary in the coal mine” for early warning. One of the most effective and cost-efficient ways to help reduce the risks of mass atrocities, then, is to invest in local peacebuilders and their work at the community level, and to help link it up to national and international prevention efforts. Unfortunately, the international community often ignores the importance of local solutions, and as a result trivializes and marginalizes the contributions of local peacebuilders.

Today, I want to share three examples of how local peacebuilding can help prevent atrocities, along with three recommendations from our experience and research for strengthening local

peacebuilding as a critical part of the global community's atrocity prevention toolbox. I will also offer specific steps Congress can take to advance those recommendations.

Three Examples of How Local Peacebuilding Prevents Atrocities

- 1. Burundi** – Burundi has recently been held up as an example of both the challenges and successes of investing in atrocities prevention, including through efforts by the US government and the Atrocities Prevention Board. While the current situation in Burundi remains deeply concerning, the country has not erupted into mass violence following the highly contested 2015 elections as some feared it would. We credit the Burundian people first and foremost for helping to prevent broad-scale violence, along with significant investments by the international community following the Arusha Accords and in recent years to support community-based peacebuilding in the country. These investments helped rebuild social cohesion at the local level after decades of traumatizing cycles of mass atrocities. They strengthened leadership and resilience of local populations to resist mobilization to violence and seek nonviolent paths of managing crises. Peace Direct has supported local peacebuilding initiatives in Burundi for more than 8 years now, particularly through the work of young people educating their peers on nonviolence and a network of citizen monitors who report and respond to incidents in their communities to tap down violence. Despite stalled high-level peace processes and increasing requirements for international organizations to operate in the country, this work of violence prevention and peacebuilding in communities by Burundians themselves has not stopped. Their experience offers important lessons in how long-term investments in locally-led peacebuilding can build social resilience and help prevent mass atrocities.
- 2. Sudan** – For some years now we have worked with a local organization called the Collaborative for Peace in Sudan, which supports local peace committees in some of the hardest to reach areas of the country. The peace committees are local groups that include leaders from different ethnic groups who meet regularly and organize together to directly intervene when conflicts erupt and help resolve disputes. An independent evaluation found that by supporting these local peace committees over five years and providing small amounts of rapid response funds, they were able to intervene and resolve 32 disputes involving multiple tribes in South and West Kordofan, before they escalated into violence. These local peace committees can function with quite small resources, but they do need funds for vehicles, gas, and other basic transportation. In one example local peace committees were able to intervene in a dispute between two groups in South Kordofan, an area out of bounds for most of the international community, who were threatening war against each other and had mobilized their fighters. Not only did the peace committee succeed in brokering a peace agreement to prevent fighting, but they also relocated 1,000 people from an IDP camp as well as all the students in a nearby school, in order to remove innocent people from harm's way. This is a good example of how building community resilience over time through the establishment of peace committees led to the protection of civilians in a high atrocity risk situation.
- 3. Pakistan** – Finally, an example from Pakistan which speaks to the power of young people, particularly women, in pushing back against extremist violence. For more than ten years now, Peace Direct has supported Aware Girls, an organization working with

young people, particularly young women and girls, in Taliban strong-hold areas to promote nonviolence and reduce recruitment into armed groups. Aware Girls was founded by two remarkable young women, Gulalai and Saba Ismail, who opted out of extremism and chose instead to mobilize other young people to build peace. Aware Girls began with just a few volunteers and now supports a network of over 500 young people across Northwest Pakistan and across the border in Afghanistan, who are directly intervening with their peers who are at risk of being recruited into armed groups and providing them with an alternative path to become leaders in their communities through nonviolent social organizing. They have documented testimonies of participants in their programs who attest that they were prepared to become suicide bombers until they discovered through Aware Girls' programs that there was another option for belonging and leadership. To date, Gulalai and Saba estimate that Aware Girls has prevented 200 potential suicide bomb attacks, suggesting thousands of civilian lives saved. In the process, they have also built a network of young peace leaders who are helping to transform their communities and strengthen the prospects for a more tolerant, nonviolent future.

Three Lessons from Local Peacebuilders to Prevent Atrocities

In addition to directly supporting local peacebuilders and their work, Peace Direct also conducts research with local civil society to better understand what works to prevent violence and advance peace. In 2017, as part of our Local Voices for Peace project, which has been supported by the US Institute of Peace, we held a four-day online consultation with over 90 civil society practitioners and experts around the world on peacebuilding approaches to preventing atrocities. We learned a great deal through this dialogue about what local people who experience the realities of atrocities believe needs to be done to prevent violence, and what they are already doing to build resilience in their communities. A full report of the findings of the peace exchange are available online and I would like to request that the Executive Summary of the report be entered into the record with my testimony today.

Today I will share just three key lessons from our experience and research with local peacebuilders, as well as specific recommendations from Peace Direct for Congress.

- 1. The first lesson is to go local and move upstream.** We know that the global effort to prevent and stop atrocities will require a collective, multi-sector approach inclusive of intergovernmental institutions, governments, civil society organizations and networks, academia, and local peacebuilders. Robust peacekeeping and rapid interventions have shown some promise, but they are reactive, attempting to stop mass violence only once it is underway. Effective prevention requires longer term, early action that focuses on local capacity building and support for actors on the ground: those who experience the early warning signs of possible mass atrocity and genocide. Getting ahead of mass atrocities to prevent the killing before it starts means investing earlier to strengthen the capacities of societies find nonviolent solutions when conflicts arise and to resist the dehumanizing processes that mass atrocities require.

Local peacebuilders utilize a diverse range of strategies and approaches, tailored to their specific contexts, to help prevent mass atrocities. These include creating opportunities for dialogue and understanding across ethnic, religious, and other groups; promoting grassroots reconciliation and addressing root causes of violence; preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence; supporting youth as positive peace leaders in their communities; and developing early warning and response systems.

Donors and policymakers should support (politically and financially) these kinds of inclusive and adaptive local efforts to prevent violence and strengthen community resilience over the long term. The US and other international actors should engage more directly with local communities in the design of atrocity prevention strategies and programs, and ensure that those most directly impacted by violence are at the center of long-term prevention efforts.

Congress can specifically support more recognition and engagement with local peacebuilding actors by passing the Global Fragility and Violence Reduction Act of 2018 (H.R. 5273). This bipartisan legislation requires a coordinated strategy within the US government and with other key stakeholders, including local civil society, to develop and implement evidence-based measures that will reduce violence in specific conflict-affected countries. Specifically, the bill requires that the Administration create “interagency plans to ensure appropriate local actors, including governance and civil society entities, and organizations led by women, youth, and under-represented communities have roles in developing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating, and updating relevant aspects of each such pilot country plan.” We urge Congress to pass this legislation.

- 2. The second lesson is to invest wisely in prevention.** The World Bank and United Nations recently concluded that investing in preventing the outbreak of violence would be economically beneficial, with average net savings between \$5-70 billion per year (Pathways to Peace, 2018). Yet, the prevention of violent conflict remains massively underfunded while the costs of violent conflict to the global community escalate, now exceeding \$14 trillion per year. What funding is available for prevention and peacebuilding rarely reaches those frontline actors or contributes to long-term community resilience. Despite broad recognition that effective foreign assistance in conflict contexts requires flexible and integrated funding mechanisms and multi-year timelines, much of the donor funding available for atrocity prevention is too little, too late, and too difficult for local civil society actors to access.

Donor funding structures should be more focused on strengthening local capacities for atrocity prevention by investing in longer-term programming, core organizational support and rapid response funding instruments in the full cycle of conflict, from its root causes to ongoing atrocities to recovery. International donors should establish and invest in innovative financing structures to support locally-led prevention, as recently recommended by the World Bank and UN. In addition, the private sector can play a key

role in supporting local peacebuilding by mobilizing new investments that can catalyze and help scale grassroots efforts in sustainable ways.

Over recent years, the US government has developed a number of funds and programs within USAID and the State Department which are improving the investments of tax payer dollars toward long-term prevention and building societal resilience against atrocities. Investments in human rights, democracy, governance, conflict management, and peacebuilding are vital to preventing violence today and saving lives and dollars in the future. They should be at the forefront of our civilian capacities and any reform efforts within State and USAID.

Congress can play a significant role in improving the US government's capacities to help prevent mass atrocities by supporting and increasing annual funding for these civilian programs and providing oversight that helps ensure funding reaches and includes local peacebuilders to lead the design, implementation, and monitoring of programs. Supporting local actors to prevent conflicts from escalating into mass atrocities and humanitarian disasters would save precious lives and treasure, and would reduce the pressures for our military to deploy again and again to foreign conflict zones.

- 3. The third lesson is a reminder to first Do No Harm.** To play a leadership role in protecting human rights and preventing mass atrocities globally, the US should first ensure that it is not adding fuel to the fire where violence is underway, or promoting policies that may unintentionally undermine the protection of civilians and increase the risks of large-scale violence.

In many places where our partners work, weak or abusive governments are key risk factor in the potential for mass atrocities. In some cases, governments are actively involved in perpetrating atrocities and may perceive local peacebuilding efforts as a threat. How the US government engages with those governments, its diplomatic, development, and military relationships, and how it uses its voice to advocate for, or undermine, human rights and peacebuilding is critical.

As one example of which this body is well aware, the US has been criticized for the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia that continue to be used against civilians in Yemen. Congress, and this Commission in particular, has a critical role to play in ensuring oversight for US involvement in wars, including weapons sales. We urge you to provide strong leadership in reviewing US arms sales policies and specific weapons transfers to ensure we are not increasing the risks of human rights abuses and mass atrocities or fueling violence against civilians. We urge you to halt any weapons sales that could contribute to the mass suffering of civilians in Yemen or elsewhere. If we are serious about our commitment to upholding human rights and the commitment of "never again," then the US government should make the prevention of mass atrocities a top priority in its conduct of foreign policy and its engagement with other states.

In closing, I would like to again thank this Commission and its Co-Chairs for the bipartisan leadership you have steadily shown to supporting human rights and promoting more peaceful

and just relationships around the world. Earlier this year, and thanks to many of you, the House of Representatives passed the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, demonstrating that ending the mass suffering of innocent civilians is not a partisan issue and is one to which Congress remains committed. Thank you. We hope to see the Senate pass this bill soon as well, and to continue building on the growing momentum around these issues in the next Congress.

At Peace Direct we increasingly understand that the work of building peace and preventing violence around the globe begins in our own backyards, and we look forward to working more with Congress to strengthen local peacebuilding here and abroad.