

Remarks by Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide,

14th Session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues on the theme of: '*Conflict prevention and the protection of minorities*'

2 December 2021

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by expressing my regret that I could not join you in person for this important discussion. Let me also take this opportunity to thank the Special Rapporteur, Dr. Fernand de Varennes, for placing on the agenda of this Forum the important theme of: 'Conflict prevention and the protection of minorities'

This topic goes to the core of my mandate and the mandate of my Office. As the United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, I am mandated to monitor and raise alarm over situations across the world where there is a risk of genocide and related atrocity crimes, by which I mean crimes against humanity and war crimes. In addition, my mandate, and that of my Office, is to raise awareness on the causes and dynamics of these crimes to strengthen capacity of Member States, regional organizations, civil society, and local communities to prevent them. In short, it is my role to raise the alarm and advocate and recommend specific prevention action.

From history we know that atrocity crimes, and genocide, are not random or spontaneous events, neither do they occur in a vacuum. Genocide constitutes the end point of a process which develops over time, with several risk factors and warning signs present. In my Office we have developed a tool for identifying and analyzing these risk factors and early warning signs, based on our experience as well as through extensive consultations and research on past instances where atrocity crimes have been committed. We use this tool, published in 2014, called the 'Framework for Analysis' to identify the most common risk factors and early warning

signs associated with the commission of atrocity crimes and identify situations of concern and make recommendations for preventative action. The Framework of Analysis is also used by Member States and civil society actors across the world who are working to advance atrocity prevention in their communities.

Two of the most critical risk factors identified in the Framework of Analysis are directly related to the topic of this forum: first, the presence of an armed conflict and second, patterns of discrimination and marginalization of protected groups, including ethnic and religious minorities. Preventing conflict and ensuring the protection of minorities are therefore key ingredients to effective atrocity prevention.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Unfortunately, we are seeing concerning trends across the world when it comes to both risk areas.

Hard won gains in building democratic institutions and protecting human rights are being eroded by those who seek to maintain or consolidate power at any cost, leading to tension and violence. Likewise, we are seeing in situations of armed conflict a growing disregard for fundamental tenets of international law and protection of civilians. From the deliberate targeting of civilians by non-State armed groups, to the indiscriminate use of air power by States against civilian populations and on protected civilian objects, such as hospitals and schools. From Myanmar, Ethiopia, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen, to mention just a few, the devastating impact of conflict is causing human suffering at an unacceptable scale. The targeting of civilian populations or the complete disregard for their protection leaves them vulnerable to mass violence and atrocity crimes.

The second risk factor and topic of your discussion today is the protection of minorities from discrimination, hate speech and other forms of identity-based violence. Unfortunately, we continue to witness a global surge in hateful and divisive rhetoric including xenophobia, racism, antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, attacks on Christian communities and misogyny. Such hate speech is amplified at an unprecedented rate by digital technology and has resulted in hate crimes, discrimination, and violence. Hate speech, when accompanied by policies and practices

that discriminate against populations based on their identity, can be both a precursor and a trigger of atrocity crimes, in particular genocide.

We know this from history, we saw it in the Holocaust, and in the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, where hate speech and the dehumanization of ‘the other’ was present during, after and long before violence broke out and such crimes were committed.

More recent examples of hate speech and discrimination based on identity having contributed to large scale violence include in Myanmar, years of hatred and exclusionary rhetoric against the Rohingya both online and offline, together with discriminatory practices, leading to a climate in which mass violence against this population occurred. The Fact-Finding Mission set up by the Human Rights Council has documented some of these instances. In Ethiopia, rampant hate speech is contributing to divide communities along ethnic lines, with a negative impact on trust building and leading to the loss of lives. Inflammatory statements used by top political leaders and associated armed groups with dehumanizing language like “cancer”, “devil” and “weed” to refer to the Tigray conflict have been widely propagated online. Violent extremist groups have used social media platforms to recruit, disseminate hateful narratives, and incite violence. In Iraq and Syria, for example, ISIL used social media platforms to spread their exclusionary ideology and incitement to violence, including against the Yazidi.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Despite the concerning trends we are witnessing around the world, let us all remember that atrocity crimes are not inevitable. We can prevent them. They remain a reality in our world today because we continue to fail to learn from past mistakes and take the necessary action to address the risks of these crimes in our communities and societies.

To be effective in preventing atrocity crimes we must do more to root out hatred and discrimination against populations based on their identity. At the United Nations we have developed a global Strategy and Plan of Action for tackling the growing trends of hate speech I mentioned, including its driver and root causes. My Office is the systemwide focal point for this Strategy and is working with several partners in all regions for its implementation. The Secretary-General has also issued his Call to Action for Human Rights, which includes protecting

the right of the most vulnerable in society, including ethnic, religious, national, and racial minorities.

This must also go hand in hand with addressing root causes of violence, divisions and tension in our societies and promoting peace and inclusion. States have the primary responsibility to prevent populations from atrocity crimes. While there has been much progress in this regard, including increased understanding of the early warning signs of these crimes, more efforts are still needed to ensure that this translates into early response. Effective prevention should also include placing local communities at the center of action and supporting them to implement prevention strategies at the community level. In this context, it is critical that those with influence in communities such as political, religious and community leaders, and civil society actors advocate for peaceful coexistence. Insofar as minorities constitute vulnerable communities in many of the places they inhabit, it is essential to strengthen efforts in this direction.

Finally, effective prevention also requires the international community to take timely action to protect populations at risk of these crimes and to hold accountable those responsible. Too often we have seen the inability of the Security Council to take unified action to protect population at risk of even the most serious crimes. I am glad to see that other intergovernmental bodies such as the Human Rights Council have tried to fill the gap by taking proactive approaches to prevention and establishing mechanisms for accountability for the most serious crimes. Much more is needed from the international community to live up to the commitments we have made to protect populations against these crimes; we are still far too often failing to do so. I hope your conversation today can generate concrete recommendations and action in this regard, building on existing tools and mechanisms. I look forward to seeing the outcome of the Forum's deliberations and working closely with all of you in its implementation. You can count on my Office as a partner in taking these efforts forward.

Thank you.