

Written evidence submitted by Gillian McKay, PhD Candidate at the University of Leeds

ABOUT

- 1 This submission has been prepared by Gillian McKay, a PhD Candidate in the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds. Her research is focused on the United Kingdom's approach to mass atrocity prevention and is being undertaken in collaboration with the Aegis Trust, supervised within the European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Her academic background is in psychology and human rights law, and she has previously worked in the humanitarian and development sectors.

SUMMARY

- 2 What follows is a response to the Committee's call for evidence on the Government's approach to mass atrocity prevention in general and, in particular, what role **UK aid** may be able to play in strengthening this approach. It speaks specifically to the localisation agenda and the need for greater collaboration, coherence, and complementarity across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programmes; sign-posting to **lessons** that might be learned from UK engagement since the end of the Cold War.

Assumptions in the Government's Current Approach

- 3 Although the *Integrated Review* recognised atrocity prevention as a distinct policy priority, the Government still insists that efforts to prevent mass atrocity crimes are in fact integrated into 'existing workstreams' designed to address conflict and instability overseas.¹ This position appears to rest on three incomplete assumptions: that (i) the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is a multilateral responsibility, (ii) preventing conflict prevents mass atrocities, and (iii) democracy is an antidote to identity-based violence.
- 4 The problem with the first assumption, summarised in a 2008 parliamentary briefing, is that fulfilling R2P in practice has been stymied by the institutional limitations of the United Nations (UN) and power politics within the Security Council.² In the early 2000s, for instance, the UK was able to – as 'penholder' for the crisis – avoid placing Darfur on the Council's agenda, or at least significantly water down statements to similar effect.³ Likewise, in 2009, UN presidential statements on the atrocities unfolding in Sri Lanka were heavily diluted to secure consensus, with crimes perpetrated by state actors entirely omitted from publications.⁴ These issues are now playing out over Syria, Myanmar, Yemen, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), where permanent members of the Council – including the UK – are acting to protect their own interests or those of their allies. Thus, seeing R2P as solely a multilateral responsibility – rather than one which can also be

¹ See the Government's [response](#) to the International Development Committee's inquiry into the Tigray crisis

² [House of Commons Library Research Paper](#)

³ [Bellamy 2005](#); [Giffkins, Ralph and Jarvis 2019](#); see also [Smith, 2010](#)

⁴ [Nackers, 2015](#)

discharged independently of the Security Council – holds back more effective implementation of the norm in practice.

- 5 On the second assumption, a pervasive misunderstanding of the distinction between conflict and atrocity crimes has often enabled the Government to sidestep its protection responsibilities. In Rwanda, for example, the UK characterised the violence ‘as a barbaric civil war resulting from ancient animosities’⁵ while crimes in Bosnia were thought to be an inevitable by-product of the Balkans war rooted in ‘ancient ethnic hatreds’.⁶ In a similar vein, the International Development Committee heard in 2004 that the UK prioritised resolution of the north-south conflict in Sudan at the expense of atrocity prevention in Darfur,⁷ and in Myanmar, the ‘2015 ceasefire agreement created a sense of progress despite the continuing threat of genocide in Rakhine State’.⁸ In Kenya, too, although the Department for International Development’s (DfID) *Strategic Conflict Assessment*⁹ predicted violent elections in December 2007, efforts to prevent conflict did not specifically prevent election-related atrocity crimes. It might therefore be argued that opportunities were actually missed to prevent the latter due to an overemphasis on the former.¹⁰
- 6 Relatedly, and on the final assumption, although democratic societies are less likely to experience atrocity crimes, elections are in themselves a common trigger for mass violence.¹¹ In Kenya, for example, violence was perpetrated along ethno-political lines and the underlying grievances which led to widespread abuses in early 2008 were never fully addressed; perhaps explaining why the 2022 elections are expected to be particularly violent.¹² Academics have likewise noted that, rather than prevent atrocity crimes, the democratic transition in Myanmar ‘sharply exacerbated’ the risks faced by Rohingya communities.¹³ Similar trends have been observed in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)¹⁴ where, in some parts of the country, despite substantial UK investment in electoral processes, there was a 400% increase in election-related violence in 2016.¹⁵ This is not to say that one norm – democracy promotion or atrocity prevention – should be prioritised over the other, but rather that there needs to be a recognition of where the former might inadvertently undermine the latter.

UK Aid and Atrocity Prevention

- 7 While there’s no silver bullet for atrocity prevention in every, if any, case, having a national mechanism through which stakeholders can coordinate across government and with civil society will be particularly important in the face of devastating aid cuts. The reduced pot of funding from which atrocity prevention can now be pursued – for example, through aid

⁵ [Melvern and Williams, 2004](#)

⁶ [Ferguson, 2020](#)

⁷ International Development Committee [Inquiry Report](#) (2005); see also [Ralph, 2014](#)

⁸ [Ralph and Staunton, 2020](#)

⁹ Now the Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS) – see [Ralph, 2014](#) for an overview of JACS and R2P

¹⁰ [Sharma, 2015](#); see also Gordon Brown’s [statement](#) at the Security Council in 2008

¹¹ [McLoughlin, 2015](#)

¹² [Ogenga, 2021](#)

¹³ [Ralph and Staunton, 2020](#); see also [Ferguson, 2021](#) on UK policy in Myanmar

¹⁴ [Autesserre, 2021](#)

¹⁵ Foreign and Commonwealth Office *Human Rights and Democracy Report* ([2011](#), [2016](#), [2018](#))

programmes in countries at risk or recovering from atrocities – need not be a limitation, but rather a driver for more effective aid spending. Funds need to be directed towards, and more accessible to, local counterparts who are able to drive change from the grass-roots,¹⁶ which is why initiatives to localise protection agendas should play a central role in reformulating the Government’s approach to mass atrocity prevention.

- 8 The need to ‘localise’ international assistance was acknowledged in 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit, where the international community agreed to spend aid more effectively and strengthen engagement to achieve more sustainable impact. The resultant *Grand Bargain* housed a ‘dual nexus’ approach that sought to bridge the gaps between humanitarian and development assistance, though, in his pivot towards prevention, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres suggested that a ‘triple nexus’ approach was needed.¹⁷ In 2019, the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development then agreed on a set of commitments to address problems which spanned a triple humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus and which called for ‘greater collaboration, coherence, and complementarity.’ The sections that follow draw attention to lessons that might be learned from UK practice in each element of the framework as well as where nexus implementation has already been initiated.

Humanitarian Response

- 9 Pillar III of R2P confers responsibility on the international community to respond once it has been established that a state is ‘manifestly failing’ to protect its population from mass atrocities.¹⁸ One way in which this responsibility might be fulfilled in practice is by ensuring that at-risk populations are out of immediate harm’s way. This could be through protected safe zones, like those proposed recently in Afghanistan,¹⁹ or those established in Iraq and Bosnia during the 1990s. This kind of ‘coercive protection’ has had mixed results, however, with reasonable success in Iraq but tragic failure in Bosnia.²⁰
- 10 Professor Alex Bellamy has also recommended that neighbouring states can uphold their responsibility to accept populations fleeing atrocity crimes, and that the international community can provide support to receiving states and host communities.²¹ In this way, the UK has provided substantial relief to refugees from Burundi, Myanmar, Syria, and the OPT.²² In 2003, the Government sought to formalise this regional containment approach, though it was criticised as an attempt to reduce asylum applications in the UK rather than offer any substantive means to protect populations fleeing serious human rights abuses.²³
- 11 A resettlement scheme introduced not long after this controversial proposal, capped annually at 500 individuals, initially welcomed arrivals from DRC, Sudan, Ethiopia, Iraq, and

¹⁶ See [Peace Direct, 2021](#)

¹⁷ [Barakat and Milton, 2020](#)

¹⁸ [Gallagher, 2014](#)

¹⁹ [Gowan, 2021](#)

²⁰ [Orchard, 2018](#)

²¹ [Bellamy, 2013](#)

²² Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [various](#)

²³ [Human Rights Watch, 2003](#)

Myanmar.²⁴ More recently, schemes to resettle vulnerable Syrians and children from the Middle East and North Africa have provided protection for thousands of people, ultimately removing potential victims from the environment in which they are at risk.²⁵ The Afghan resettlement scheme announced in 2021 offers a similar means to protect up to 20,000 individuals from the Taliban and other aggressors, as does the offer open to British Nationals Overseas in Hong Kong, but these schemes ultimately do not prevent the commission of mass atrocity crimes from which these people are in need of protection.

Development Assistance

- 12 Humanitarian response, although important, is therefore not the ideal option given that it is inherently reactive, and that there are often opportunities to prevent a crisis from deteriorating before more drastic measures are required; particularly where donor countries like the UK already have a presence or networks on the ground. Under Pillar II of R2P, the international community has a responsibility to assist and encourage states in upholding their primary responsibility (Pillar I) before it reaches the need for a (usually more controversial) Pillar III response. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon suggested that one way in which this might manifest in practice is through capacity-building of either state or non-state structures to prevent atrocity crimes.
- 13 Ban specifically identified two types of capacity relevant to R2P: capacity to ‘help prevent escalation from risk to imminent crisis’ and capacity to ‘hold authorities to account.’²⁶ Regarding the former, he suggested seven ‘inhibitors’ that may contribute to effective prevention – ‘a professional and accountable security sector,’ ‘impartial institutions for overseeing political transitions,’ ‘independent judicial and human rights institutions,’ ‘capacity to assess risk and mobilise early response,’ ‘local capacity to resolve conflicts,’ ‘media capacity to counteract prejudice and hate speech,’ and ‘capacity for effective and legitimate transitional justice’ – and, in lieu of space available here, this section will focus only on the first.
- 14 The UK has worked globally to build indigenous capacity of security forces for decades, including those implicated in or unable to prevent mass atrocity crimes. Programmes to ‘transform’ the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, for example,²⁷ were unable to prevent abuses committed within and by the army, much in the same way that British training of the Burmese military didn’t contribute to effective atrocity prevention in Myanmar.²⁸ Likewise, efforts to reform the security sector in DRC have not disrupted cycles of mass violence committed by state or non-state actors.²⁹ In Iraq and Afghanistan, although security forces trained by the UK appear to have been less likely to commit widespread and systematic abuses themselves, their capacity to prevent such crimes being committed by non-state actors has been less successful (at least in part due to unchecked corruption and militia infiltration).³⁰ Indeed, Coalition airstrikes were needed in 2014 to defeat the so-called

²⁴ Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [various](#)

²⁵ [Gilgan, 2017](#)

²⁶ [UN Secretary-General, 2014](#)

²⁷ DevTracker [Project Summary](#)

²⁸ International Development Committee’s [report](#) on the Rohingya crisis

²⁹ DevTracker [Project Summary](#)

³⁰ Defence Committee reports on [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#)

Islamic State in Iraq, while forces in Afghanistan were more recently unable to hold off the Taliban's return to power in the face of international withdrawal.

Peacebuilding Efforts

- 15 Although the 2005 World Summit outcome document separates peacebuilding from R2P (referring only to a responsibility to 'prevent' and to 'react'), the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) – which first conceptualised the norm – spoke of a 'responsibility to rebuild' in post-intervention contexts. In line with this definition, Professor Roland Paris has described peacebuilding as 'an integral part of R2P.'³¹ One way in which this might be understood is therefore as a reparative responsibility following interventions in Iraq,³² Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. Alternatively, it might be ensuring the non-recurrence of atrocities after having provided humanitarian relief to populations in protected zones or displacement camps, or in other post-conflict contexts.
- 16 Peacebuilding has, however, been criticised by some as a top-down venture led by external actors unfamiliar with the nuances of the context in which they are seeking to build peace. Indeed, the way in which most peacebuilding programmes are conceived and evaluated – through 'theory of change' models, short-term funding cycles, and abstract outcomes³³ – can sometimes, at best, facilitate no real change, or, at worst, exacerbate atrocity risks further. Programmes are also usually designed by donors each with their own interests and ways of working – in Afghanistan, for example, 25 provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) were funded by 13 different donors³⁴ - or implemented by departments with similarly distinct priorities and responsibilities.³⁵
- 17 The UK's PRTs were designed under a *Comprehensive Approach* which sought to 'reduc[e] the need for military intervention by building a capacity for preventive action.'³⁶ Despite substantial investment in these teams, however, a lack of local integration appears to have undermined this rhetorical commitment to prevention. Indeed, staff lived in a fortified military compound, segregated from the population with which they were supposed to be engaging³⁷ - though this is considered to be a sector-wide failure not unique to the UK.³⁸ Ultimately, many have claimed that reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and the OPT were unsuccessful for the simple reason that they failed to incorporate sufficient local knowledge.³⁹ This is why, in line with the ICISS definition of R2P, a 'process of devolving responsibility back to the local community' is important for effective peacebuilding and atrocity prevention alike.

The Nexus

³¹ [Paris, 2016](#)

³² [Ralph and Souter, 2015](#)

³³ [Autesserre, 2021](#)

³⁴ International Development Committee's [report](#) on Afghanistan; also a problem in Mali [Gallagher \(2015\)](#)

³⁵ Defence Committee's [report](#) on the Comprehensive Approach

³⁶ Government's [response](#) to Defence Committee

³⁷ International Development Committee's [report](#) on Afghanistan

³⁸ [Autesserre, 2021](#)

³⁹ [Barakat and Milton, 2020](#); [Autesserre, 2021](#)

- 18 The UK is often praised for its ability to provide generous humanitarian relief in rapid onset crises, but, as noted above, although this might contribute to effective protection, it falls short of successful prevention. This is not to say, however, that atrocity prevention need not be a consideration for humanitarian actors. In fact, atrocity crimes directed at those in safe zones or displacement camps could still be prevented, or the recurrence of atrocities which caused those populations to flee in the first place might also be preventable.
- 19 Failed efforts to reform security sectors or reconstruct societies also highlight the need for decisions to be made by those who have to live with their consequences, and that ‘success’ ought to be measured by those who know what that might look like.⁴⁰ There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ for any one element of the nexus, just as there isn’t for implementing any one pillar of R2P. In fact, this is at the core of the principle itself: ‘that each crisis should be dealt with on a “case-by-case” basis... precisely because of the difficulties, complexities and trade-offs involved in such extreme political environments.’⁴¹ Given also that populations in crisis tend not to differentiate between humanitarian, development or peacebuilding programmes - and therefore between ‘sectors that structure the international aid apparatus’ - the grass-roots is ‘a natural place for working beyond silos.’⁴²
- 20 The UK is well-placed to engage with the lessons a nexus approach might offer for atrocity prevention. In a 2019 study of UK implementation, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) found that, at the programme-level, joined-up needs assessments, development of Business Cases (i.e., programme design and development), and mechanisms for sharing information and lessons learned all relied on individuals rather than ‘being driven from top-level policy.’ This is a problem also highlighted by Dr Kate Ferguson in DRC and Myanmar, where atrocity risks are not monitored or communicated systematically, but rather depend on individuals with the capacity and resources to do so.⁴³
- 21 Ferguson also noted that the absence of a mechanism to coordinate cross-departmental working meant that opportunities were missed to prevent the escalation of violence in Myanmar in 2017. More recently, however, staff have been developing a country-level framework for atrocity prevention, much like colleagues had done in South Sudan a few years earlier. It is worth noting that staff in both Myanmar and South Sudan have also been taking steps to implement the triple nexus approach, and that valuable lessons may therefore be learned from this experience for atrocity prevention - particularly given that ‘cross-pollination’ of expertise has reportedly led to programmatic successes.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 22 There is some evidence that – at least indirectly, if not purposefully - atrocity prevention has been considered in aid programmes delivered by the UK in countries at risk of or experiencing mass violence. But, as appears to have been the case with the triple nexus approach, implementation is mostly left to individuals who understand the problem and

⁴⁰ [Autesserre, 2021](#)

⁴¹ [Gallagher, 2015](#)

⁴² [Barakat and Milton, 2020](#)

⁴³ [Ferguson, 2021](#)

⁴⁴ [Overseas Development Institute, 2019](#)

have the time or resources to dedicate to monitoring it. Going forward, the main role that UK aid could play in atrocity prevention is therefore ensuring a more collaborative, coherent and complementary approach, whether intervening in response to imminent or ongoing atrocities, preventing their recurrence, or bringing back societies from the brink of crisis to a situation of less serious concern. Three recommendations may therefore be worth the Committee's consideration:

- At the programme-level, collaboration with at-risk or affected populations should be undertaken from project design and development to monitoring and evaluation in order to avoid inadequate or inappropriate investment;
- A coordinating mechanism should be established to formalise cross-government working and the means by which coherent warnings and lessons can be shared across sectoral and departmental boundaries as well as international borders; and
- The UK should continue to engage with other donors (particularly through the International Atrocity Prevention Working Group), civil society and the private sector to ensure greater complementarity in ways of working to prevent mass atrocities.