

Promoting dialogue and preventing atrocities: the UK government approach

Written evidence from Members of the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group to the International Development Committee

1. About

1.1 This is a joint submission from the [UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group](#) (Working Group). The Working Group was established in 2017 and is coordinated by Protection Approaches. It comprises over 20 UK-based NGOs, research institutions, and individual experts working in different ways to build a world where mass atrocity crimes and other forms of identity-based violence are less likely. The Group is considered an exemplar national network in the field and has been working with the UK Government, Parliament, and wider civil society to enhance British contributions to the timely and effective prediction and prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocities.

1.2 Our members work in varied ways towards a world without mass atrocities, some undertaking work more discretely or choosing not to publicly engage with policy-facing activities. This submission is publicly co-signed by the following members of the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group: Burma Campaign UK, Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, Jo Cox Foundation, Korea Future, Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict, Peace Direct, Protection Approaches, Rights for Peace, Remembering Srebrenica, Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice, United Against Inhumanity, United Nations Association-UK, Videre est Credere, Waging Peace.

2. The need for atrocity prevention

2.1 Our evidence submission comes from members of the UK's civil society Atrocity Prevention Working Group and draws from our collective expertise on atrocity and identity-based violence prevention. Our members bring diverse approaches to the prevention of mass violence and in-depth experience of situations experiencing, or facing risks of, atrocity violence including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Syria, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Sudan, North Korea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Afghanistan. The Working Group was founded in 2017 because the United Kingdom was falling behind other countries in its approaches the prevention of mass atrocities.¹ The Working Group was created with the specific objective of enhancing UK state and civil society contributions towards the prevention of mass atrocity crimes.

2.2 Since then, the Working Group has worked with subsequent governments and invited increased engagement between Government and our members with the explicit intention of raising our collective alarm at what we unfortunately see as a

¹ Protection Approaches, [“Preventing mass atrocities: could UK civil society be doing more?”](#), 15 August 2018

persistent reluctance to take seriously the threat to global and British security posed by modern mass atrocity crimes. While certain modest but important changes and concessions have been made by this Government, our group, as the representative network of UK organisations working on atrocity prevention, has not been able to meet with HMG for two years. We have been neither briefed nor consulted on how the welcome commitments of the Integrated Review relating to atrocity prevention are being or will be implemented. At the time of writing, we have no clear understanding of if or how any changes to UK policy, systems or resourcing have been made relating to the UK's approach to atrocity prevention. We know that global trends of climate collapse, democratic backsliding and the internationalisation of hate-based networks will continue to drive identity-based violence, including mass atrocity crimes, in every region of the world.² Preparing for and contributing towards the prevention of this pathology of violence is a matter of British national security, a collective responsibility, and is economically sensible.

2.3 In recent years the Government has made commitments that our Group has welcomed, including publication in 2019 of the cross-departmental guidance note on the UK's national approach to atrocity prevention,³ the clarification that Lord Ahmad is the Minister with responsibility for atrocity prevention, and the clear promise to prioritise atrocity prevention made in the outcomes paper of the Integrated Review.⁴ We recognise too the proactive ways in which some individual embassy and country teams, such as Myanmar and the DRC, have engaged with and committed to integrating atrocity prevention in their work. However, the persistent reluctance to look at cross-cutting, systemic gaps and to recognise the distinct challenge posed by mass atrocity crimes have left the UK repeatedly unprepared in the face of appalling situations of atrocity. These cycles of violence and trauma are not always preventable – nor is the UK solely able to stem trajectories of crises – but even against modest markers, repeatedly our collective assessment of UK capabilities, policy and impact has been found wanting. We are not alone: The Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FASC) and the International Development Committee (IDC) have both documented this unpreparedness in their own inquiries scrutinising UK policy towards Myanmar, Syria, Xinjiang, and Ethiopia.⁵

2.4 While all states must shoulder the burden of prevention and protection, we believe that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, as a state which aspires to global leadership, and in the interests of a secure nation, Britain can and must narrow the gaps between the commitments it has made on the global stage on this agenda and their practical implementation.⁶ While there have been important strides towards this commitment, including the welcomed recommitment to not use

² Kate Ferguson, [“Putting atrocity prevention at the heart of British policy,”](#) *Foreign Policy Centre*, 8 September 2020; Fred Carver, [“As the Sahel becomes Sahara,”](#) *UNA-UK Climate 2020*, September 2017

³ HMG, [“UK approach to preventing mass atrocities,”](#) July 2019

⁴ HMG, [“Global Britain in a competitive age The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,”](#) March 2021

⁵ IDC, [“The humanitarian situation in Tigray,”](#) 21 April 2021; FASC, [“Never Again: The UK's Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond,”](#) 8 July 2021; FASC, [“The UK Government's response to the Myanmar crisis,”](#) 16 July 2021; FASC, [“Oral evidence: Government policy on Afghanistan,”](#) 19 October 2021

⁶ Jess Gifkins, Samuel Jarvis, Jason Ralph, [“Global Britain in the United Nations,”](#) *UNA-UK*, 2018

the veto on any credible UNSC resolution to prevent or end mass atrocity, ultimately efforts from the UK government continue to fall short and its inaction risks UK complicity in mass atrocity crimes.⁷ HMG should ensure that the importance of multilateral collaboration is emphasised in all policy, guidance, and training materials, and that these materials are consistent, to the extent possible, with those issued by the United Nations and allied governments. The UK should also reiterate its support for the offices of the UN Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect and the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide through continued, enhanced and smart resourcing.

2.5 The Integrated Review and the decision to merge the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office create genuine opportunity to bring an integration of atrocity prevention across UK's foreign and international development policy and its embassies. But a state's contribution to the prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocity necessarily must also fall outside of these areas; for example in the fields of export licencing, education, asylum, border policy, justice and trade.⁸ We therefore advocate for atrocity prevention to become a matter for the National Security Council and the Cabinet Office and for the adoption of a national strategy that is embedded across the new architectures of government, similar to the national strategy on serious and organised crime. Such an approach would see its proper integration throughout departments, risk mechanisms, and policy leading to the mandating of training, enhanced collaboration with local and UK-based civil society organisations and networks, and the creation of new positions of appropriate seniority and a joining up across agendas and priorities.⁹

3. Bosnia and Herzegovina

3.1 The Working Group monitors, raises concern about, and shares concrete recommendations with the UK Government regarding countries at risk.¹⁰ On 1 December 2021 the Group published a public letter addressed to the Prime Minister about the risks of mass violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the need for the United Kingdom to respond with swift and urgent conviction, prioritising atrocity prevention.¹¹ This letter was also copied to the Chair of the International Development Committee for information. We have, at the time of writing, not yet received a response.

3.2 Many risk indicators of identity-based violence, including mass atrocities, in Bosnia and Herzegovina are worsening. In Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik and his party pushed forward with a vote that is tantamount to secession, furthers genocide denial, and violates the terms outlined in the Dayton Peace Accords¹² and

⁷ Ian Martin, "[In hindsight: what is wrong with the Security Council](#)," *Security Council Report*, 29 March 2018

⁸ UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group, "[Statement on the Integrated Review](#)," 1 April 2021

⁹ Kate Ferguson, "[A response to the Integrated Review](#)," *Foreign Policy Centre*, 18 March 2021

¹⁰ UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group, "[Joint Statement on Myanmar](#)," 5 February 2021; UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group, "[Public letter on Sudan](#)," 4 November 2021

¹¹ UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group, "[Public letter on Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)," 1 December 2021

commemorated with military parades the formation of Republika Srpska – a constitutionally outlawed practice.¹³ A weak international response is partially responsible for the emboldened steps of Dodik. The trajectory of atrocity risks in Bosnia and the dangers it poses for the wider Balkan and European regions are clear and requires a joined-up response informed by the principles of identity-based violence and atrocity prevention.

3.3 We welcome steps made by the UK government to take seriously this concerning situation, including by raising the issue at the December 2021 NATO meeting in Riga and the 2021 G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting in Liverpool¹⁴ and appointing Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach as the Special Envoy to the Western Balkans.¹⁵ We remain concerned that the gaps set out above leave the UK less informed, less able to identify points of potential leverage to contribute to reducing risks for mass atrocity violence, and less able to identify the local, regional and international networks of actors further destabilising and undermining the Bosnian state. These structural and skills gaps are exacerbated by the lack of access the Embassy team has to ringfenced atrocity prevention funds or internal atrocity prevention expertise. We do not want the UK to repeat past mistakes and urge the Committee to press the Government on these gaps, on how Whitehall is supporting the Embassy in Sarajevo with specific regard to rising risks of identity-based violence and mass atrocities, and what it will do differently in its Bosnia policy.

4. Recommendations

4.1 **HMG must recognise atrocity prevention as a matter for the National Security Council and for the Cabinet Office:** In order for the UK's response to risks and situations of mass violence around the world to be effective, it needs to recognise atrocity prevention as a distinct yet intersecting agenda. Conflating atrocity prevention with conflict prevention and by delegating it to the *Conflict Centre* risks transferring HMG's long-term blind-spots into the new FCDO architecture. Once done, this will be difficult to undo. Atrocity crimes, even when they take place in small and remote locations, reverberate around the world with devastating consequences for global stability, including domestic security. The UK's standing in the world is also closely linked to its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and the primary responsibility the UK therefore assumes for matters of global peace and security.¹⁶ Preventing atrocities is therefore a vital function for any British government.

4.2 **HMG should adopt a National Atrocity Prevention Strategy:** such a strategy would make any commitment to atrocity prevention sustainable, viable and concrete. It

¹² Daria Sito-sucic, "[Serbs vote to start quitting Bosnia's key institutions in secessionist move,](#)" *Reuters*, 11 December 2021

¹³ Igor Spaić, "[Controversy marks unconstitutional January 9 celebration in Bosnia's RS entity,](#)" *N1*, 9 January 2022

¹⁴ HMG, "[Foreign Secretary reinforces support for Western Balkans stability at talks in London,](#)" 13 December 2021

¹⁵ HMG, "[UK announces new Special Envoy to the Western Balkans,](#)" 2 December 2021

¹⁶ Jess Gifkins, Samuel Jarvis, Jason Ralph, "[Global Britain in the United Nations,](#)" *UNA-UK*, 2018

should provide a framework to draw from, and integrate the workings of, all parts of Government whose work can contribute to decreasing the likelihood of atrocities. Such a strategy can and should be a useful tool for UK civil servants: it should neither duplicate existing work in areas such as the Protection of Civilians (PoC) or Conflict Prevention. Instead, it should provide a framework, and ideally inform the development of an institutional architecture or working methodology, which will enable more focussed and effective work in the new FCDO, at both capitol and embassy level, and across Whitehall for the purpose of preventing atrocities.

4.3 The Working Group recommends that a National Atrocity Prevention Strategy be developed with three core pillars able to capture, communicate and respond to the risks of mass violence; communication, analysis, and institutionalisation.¹⁷

4.4 **Communication** Recent experiences in Myanmar, DRC, Sudan and Afghanistan have illustrated the extent to which Government would benefit from establishing a clear, light-touch internal communications protocol setting out how to monitor imminent warning signs, triggering moments, indicators and risk factors; when and how to raise the alarm – both across government and externally – and guidance on escalation.

4.5 **Analysis** An atrocity prevention analysis mechanism would facilitate intelligence collection and collation, analysis, and sharing of appropriate information. It would receive early warning from the communication strand and assess risks and threats of identity-based violence, including mass atrocities on that basis. This in turn would initiate a process of information sharing to relevant Government bodies and authorities, in order to allow those departments to conduct a risk assessment of their exposure to the possibility of complicity. The analysis strand would also undertake scenario planning, engage allies and partners, and develop the capacity to deploy civilian advisors to situations of concern. Information from national and local actors including early warning systems should be included systematically as an important part of this system through links between Embassy staff and authorities and civil society in states experiencing or at risk of mass atrocities. Current horizon scanning or risk assessment tools like the JACS used by HMG are not early warning systems; they are not able to respond to immediate threats or rapid changes.

4.6 **Institutionalisation** Establishing an atrocity prevention “seat” at the policy-making table will help maximise and coordinate contributions towards effective prediction and prevention across Government. This coordinating function could be a distinct centre or unit, fall under the Conflict Centre or Situation Centre announced in the Integrated Review, or take the form of a resourced office of the focal point for Responsibility to Protect. The institutionalisation of atrocity prevention will also formalise the communication channels and cross-departmental convening capabilities of the FCDO within Whitehall.

¹⁷ UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group, [“Submission to the Integrated Review,”](#) 17 August 2020

4.7 HMG should provide **atrocities prevention training**¹⁸ for UK country teams on how to monitor, analyse, communicate and respond to risks of mass violence. Providing these resources to embassies should include a well-sourced, designated staff person with responsibility for coordinating atrocities prevention matters. In addition, atrocities prevention must be consciously integrated into the job descriptions and job titles of all those currently responsible for UK atrocities prevention policy, including responsibility to engage with local civil society networks. We warmly welcome the IDC recommendations from its Tigray report on providing training and staffing to the Ethiopia country team, as well as country teams in neighbouring states, including Sudan and Eritrea.¹⁹ We welcome the comments made by Paul Williams, Director of Open Societies and Human Rights and former UK focal point for the Responsibility to Protect, about the need for atrocities prevention training and his drawing of attention to the trainings provided by Protection Approaches as a tool the FCDO should promote.²⁰

4.8 **Working with, listening to, supporting and reaching in to civil society organisations and networks:** Local, community and wider civil society actors contribute everywhere to the prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocities on a daily basis, whether by adopting practices and strategies to avoid escalation, employing self-protection strategies, or establishing their own response systems and using transitional justice approaches to heal communities in the aftermath of violence.²¹ Effective atrocities prevention require joined up, horizontal coordination, moving towards an integrated – and inclusive – understanding of collaboration.²² HMG should open up easy-access, quick release, low-level funds to support domestic community-based initiatives on prevention, early warning, and response efforts to identity-based violence, in addition to longer-term grant funding and support for organisational strengthening. HMG should support the creation and promotion of mechanisms for coordination between UK embassies, local civil society and other relevant actors.

4.9 **Government should strengthen and systematise how it supports, reaches in to, and leverages the expertise of its UK atrocities prevention civil society.** This includes, but is not limited to, following the practice elsewhere of ringfencing modest funds for programming, analysis, research and other activities. It also includes consultation, engagement and general recognition of the expertise that exist within and across the UK that are at the government's disposal, most especially at a time when the government may itself lack those particular skills, knowledge areas, or expertise. A National Atrocities Prevention Strategy should help provide structure and guidance to FCDO on how to enhance collaboration with UK atrocities prevention civil society and

¹⁸ United States Government, [“Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act,”](#) Public Law 115-441, 14 January 2019

¹⁹ IDC, [“The humanitarian situation in Tigray,”](#) 21 April 2021

²⁰ FASC, [“Oral evidence: Xinjiang detention camps, HC 800,”](#) 27 April 2021

²¹ Kate Ferguson, Fred Carver, [“Being the difference: A primer for states wishing to prevent atrocity crimes in the mid-twenty-first century,”](#) *Protection Approaches*, 24 November 2021; Peace Direct, [“Atrocity prevention and peacebuilding,”](#) 4 April 2018

²² Peace Direct, ADESO, WCAPS, Alliance for Peacebuilding, [“Time to decolonise aid,”](#) 10 May 2021; Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, [“In the Name of Protection: Minorities and identity in the Syrian conflict,”](#) May 2021

the parameters of information-sharing and joint analysis. Paul Williams, Director of Open Societies and Human Rights and former UK focal point for the Responsibility to Protect, has emphasised enhanced collaboration with civil society as a new tool for upstream information gathering.²³ We would welcome clarity on if/how this is being done.

4.10 To ensure any commitment to atrocity prevention is truly holistic and cross-cutting, it requires the understanding that **the responsibility to protect vulnerable populations from identity-based violence begins at home**. A more harmonised approach to resilience at home and abroad recognises that many global challenges are felt domestically as well as internationally and therefore require a joined up policy that recognises that trusted governance and social cohesion are things to be strengthened in all countries all of the time. This means UK contributions towards atrocity prevention should include cross-departmental communication, analysis and action with departments such as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Home Office in order to support, as well as collaborate with and learn from, members of diaspora and other communities impacted by mass violence.²⁴ Risk factors and indicators must be adequately communicated to the Home Office for use in its Country Policy and Information Notes, and other documentation used by decision-makers in their assessments of an asylum-seeker's credibility, and that adequate protections are made for those impacted by mass violence, making note of their particular vulnerabilities, for instance as potential victims and survivors of human trafficking. Domestic legislation should uphold international and national legal, political and moral commitments to protect communities who have suffered mass atrocities and seek sanctuary. Such efforts should be supported by training.

4.11 The Working Group welcomes the Government's withdrawal of proposals, during the passage of the Overseas Operations Act 2021, to 'triple-lock' prosecutions of UK service personnel for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. **Any new proposals to limit the territorial scope of *civil* jurisdiction over mass atrocities, including in the context of the current review of the Human Rights Act 1998²⁵, should similarly be withdrawn.** Ensuring the UK's legal system provides for the effective suppression of mass atrocities, in both criminal and civil law, is a necessary component of a credible atrocity prevention strategy.

²³ FASC, "[Oral evidence: Xinjiang detention camps, HC 800](#)," 27 April 2021

²⁴ Waging Peace, Protection Approaches, "[Sudan in transition: A window of hope](#)," 12 June 2019

²⁵ Ministry of Justice, "Human Rights Act Reform: A Modern Bill of Rights," 14 December 2021