We can’t ignore the worrying signs of genocide in Africa

**28 Jan 2016**

I have spent a lifetime working on the study of genocide, what causes it and how we can prevent the kind of mass killing that haunted the past century.

From Armenia and the Nazi Holocaust to the Soviet Gulag, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Biafra, Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur, people have been slaughtered in their millions simply because of race, religion or social class.

Now we have the International Criminal Court and, for the past decade, genocide has been less common.

But, today in Africa, I see worrying signs of its return. The discovery of mass graves in Burundi this month is not just a sign that people have been murdered. It is also a garland of shame around the African Union, which did nothing when the warnings sounded for months that mass killing was about to recur.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram has murdered thousands. In Libya, the Islamic State is establishing strongholds. The government of Sudan has killed more than three million of its own people, and continues a genocide in Darfur, the Blue Nile and South Kordofan. But African governments allow Sudan’s dictator to travel with impunity.

South Sudan is gripped by a civil war between the Dinka and the Nuer, and could see thousands more lives sacrificed on the altar of political power.

How do we make sure there’s not a return to the horror of Rwanda or Biafra?

First, we must recognise that avoiding use of the term genocide by calling it mass murder, a crime against humanity or ethnic cleansing is no excuse for failing to stop it.

Idi Amin and Milton Obote were responsible for the deaths of more than 300 000 people in Uganda, and they killed anyone who threatened their political power. A crime against humanity, for sure, but it wasn’t genocide.

It’s when you kill a national, ethnic, religious or racial group of people simply because of their identity that we use “the g word”, as lawyers and diplomats at the United Nations like to call it.

Second, we must look for warning signs. Like cancer, the earlier you intervene with diplomatic and economic pressure, the better your chance of stopping genocide.

South Africa, as the leading power on the continent, has a special responsibility to speak out – also Britain and France as former colonisers, China as a major trading partner and the United States as the largest donor of aid.

In Rwanda, the US is a major donor and needs to tell President Paul Kagame that one more term is enough. It’s time to find a successor and set forces in motion for a peaceful transition.

The US also has huge leverage in Nigeria where multinational oil companies are active.

But the US’s greatest opportunity may be on the Horn of Africa where it is engaged in the war on al-Shabab and other terrorist groups.

The Republic of Somaliland is an unrecognised state formed from the old British territories that joined with greater Somalia. It is where former Somali president Said Barré had his troops gun down thousands of civilians in the late 1980s. Recognition of Somaliland’s independence could help stave off conflict in a region that has suffered terribly.

Just north of Somaliland, the US has a military base in the tiny state of Djibouti, across the water from Yemen. Thousands of American service personnel live here, and the US has more influence with President Ismaïl Guelleh than perhaps any other country.

So I hang my head in shame that, after Guelleh’s troops opened fire on civilians on December 21 last year, neither the state department nor the White House would condemn the massacre.

As in Burundi, the problem centres around an unpopular president refusing to step down. Guelleh has already served three terms in breach of his own constitution and will stand again for election this year.

Freedom and democracy are not about being in power. They only mean something when the ruling party shows it’s not afraid to spend a few years in opposition.

It is often said we lament genocide in the aftermath, but not in the lead-up when something could have been done. Well, here we are, with the red flag of danger flying high in Burundi, and flapping to a softer but equally menacing breeze in Djibouti.

The UN and the AU avoid taking forceful, preventive action by calling the massacres, “crimes against humanity”. The term that demands action – genocide – has been narrowed by international lawyers to cases of wholesale murder like the Holocaust, Cambodia, Guatemala, Rwanda or Darfur.

Such an excuse for indifference is an affront to us all, regardless of our own nationality.

I have been working in Africa since I came here with the Peace Corps in 1969. Africa is in a better state now, with more democracy and more freedom than at any time in history. And I like what I see in South Africa in 2016. But history will not forgive us if we look away from those still at risk or in chains.

*Professor Gregory Stanton is the founder of Genocide Watch. He wrote the UN resolutions that created the Rwanda Tribunal and was instrumental in setting up the special court in Cambodia to try members of the Pol Pot regime*