

Why Do We Look The Other Way?¹

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Dr. Paul Slovic, a social psychologist at the University of Oregon, has conducted path-breaking experiments asking why we cannot sympathize with the suffering or even the murder of large numbers of people in Sudan, or Rwanda, or Bosnia, or Cambodia.

In one experiment, psychologists asked ordinary Americans to contribute five dollars to feed Rokia, a starving seven-year-old girl in Mali. About half would donate the five dollars. The same percentage would donate to save Moussa, a little boy from Mali.

But when photos of both Rokia and Moussa were shown, the percent who would donate dropped. And when the photo of Rokia was shown representing 21 million hungry Africans who could be fed by a group of trusted relief organizations, the percentage who would donate dropped to less than ten percent.

Professor Slovic calls this phenomenon “psychic numbing.” He believes human beings are usually unable to feel compassion for large numbers of people. The more victims, the less compassion.

Genocide Watch has developed an early warning system using our understanding of the genocidal process to predict and recommend policies to prevent genocide. Through the International Alliance to End Genocide, the first anti-genocide coalition (founded in 1999), we maintain close relations with policy makers who can take preventive action. Rapid response by regional alliances has prevented or stopped several genocides: in East Timor, Kosovo, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone.

We have created international tribunals to try genocidists in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, East Timor, and Cambodia. And we finally have an International Criminal Court (the ICC). The UN Security Council has referred the situation in Darfur to the ICC. It has indicted President Omar al-Bashir, Abdul Rahim, and Ahmed Harun for crimes against humanity and genocide in Darfur. But al-Bashir has just laughed. He even appointed Harun (one of those indicted) to be Governor of South Kordofan where he is leading another genocide against the people of the Nuba Mountains.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda has finished 50 trials and convicted 29 persons. The Cambodian Tribunal has sentenced Comrade Duch, the commander of the Tuol Sleng Prison that tortured and killed 14,000 Cambodians, to life in prison. And the surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge are finally on trial, thirty years after I founded the Cambodian Genocide Project while still a student at Yale Law School in 1982.

So as my hero, Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior said, “We have come a long way. But we have a long, long way to go.”

In thirty years of work against genocide, I have learned two things about genocide prevention.

¹ Genocide Prevention Advisory Network Conference Report: March 14 – 15, 2012, Guiding Principles of the Emerging Architecture Aiming At the Prevention of Genocide, War Crimes, and Crimes Against Humanity, George Mason University, Arlington, Virginia: Genocide Prevention Program, pp. 144 -147.

The first lesson is the direct result of our own human incapacity to comprehend or feel sympathy for large groups of people half way around the world.

Because individuals cannot do that, we need permanent institutions established that will watch out for precursors of genocide, take action to prevent it, intervene to stop it, and arrest and prosecute those who commit it.

Institutions are necessary to overcome the fleeting nature of our concern. That is why in 2000, I proposed and the International Alliance to End Genocide lobbied, and in 2004 the UN Secretary General created the UN Special Advisor for the Prevention of Genocide. It is why we support President Obama's U.S. Atrocities Prevention Board and the creation of similar institutions in Britain, France, Germany, India, Nigeria and other nations around the world. But warning is not enough.

We must also create institutions for action. Unfortunately, President Obama has not matched his promise of "Never again" with any concrete action to stop the Sudanese government's genocide in the Nuba Mountains and Darfur. President Obama should impose a NO FLY Zone over the Nuba Mountains. Any Sudanese bomber or helicopter gunship that attacks a Nuba village should be allowed to land and then destroyed (when their crews have left at night) by cruise missiles fired from American warships in the Indian Ocean. And their runways should be destroyed. NATO airstrikes in Libya took control of the skies from Gaddafi. The same should be done with al-Bashir's Sudan.

The UN has completely failed to prevent or stop genocide, largely because of paralysis by threatened vetoes by one or more of the permanent members so the Security Council, but also because of the UN's continuing unwillingness to offend member states. Regional alliances like NATO, ASEAN, the OAS and ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States, led by Nigeria), have been effective interveners. The UN Charter specifically authorizes regional intervention.

The International Criminal Court needs an Optional Protocol to create an international police force with the sole mandate to arrest leaders indicted by the ICC. This police force could be created without any action by the UN—through a treaty among the Assembly of States- Parties to the ICC.

The second lesson I have learned is that genocide prevention must start and be led by people from countries at risk. It cannot be led by an American organization in Washington D.C., led by a pacifist Director, that is unwilling to advocate the use of force to stop genocide. Prevention must especially begin from the ground up in countries at risk of genocide. A true International Alliance to End Genocide can support such local efforts and create an international mass movement to end genocide.

The best example is Liberia.

Leemah Gbowee, a fish seller in Monrovia, Liberia had a strange dream one night. She dreamed that the market women of Monrovia should begin each week with an hour of prayer for peace in Liberia, a country then torn apart by civil war between Charles Taylor's government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Both sides cut off arms and hands, raped women, conscripted child soldiers and turned them into killers on drugs—they committed every war crime. She told her dream to a Muslim friend who also sold fish in the market, and they began the weekly prayer meetings in the fish market. More and more women joined until five thousand women were praying every week. Charles Taylor's entourage drove blithely by in their Mercedes limosines.

Then Leemah Gbowee and the other women demanded a meeting with Charles Taylor and with the leaders of the RUF. When they met them, the women demanded an immediate ceasefire and negotiations to end the war. Both sides agreed; and talks began in Accra, Ghana. But the women didn't trust the men to make peace. They pooled their nickels and quarters, rented buses, and went to Accra themselves. They slept outside, sometimes in the rain, while the men slept in four-star hotels. The talks between the men, led by a former Nigerian President, went nowhere.

Finally, fed up, the women walked into the building where the talks were underway and sat down in the hallways. The Ghanaian police threatened to arrest them. One of the senior women said she would make it easy for them by removing all her clothes. (One of the most humiliating things that can happen to a man in Ghana is for a grandmother to disrobe in front of him.) The police backed off.

Finally the Nigerian ex-President told the men that if they didn't come to agreement in three days, he would turn the talks over to the women. The agreement they reached included the exile of Charles Taylor to Nigeria.

Peace returned to Liberia and in the next election, with the women's crucial votes, Dr. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the first woman elected President of an African country.

Leymah Gbowee, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and the Yemeni woman human rights activist, Tawakkul Karman won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

Charles Taylor was tried for his crimes and convicted. He will likely spend the rest of his life in prison.

To end genocide, it will take love that transcends all boundaries—that allows us to feel the suffering of people in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan.

To end genocide, it will take justice that tries the serial killers that commit genocide.

We should never lose hope in the power of love. Because love is God's force personally expressed.

We must never lose faith in the power of justice. Because justice is God's force socially expressed.

With love and justice, together we can end genocide.