

Remarks to the African Union - on the 28th Commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda at the African Union Commission on 7th April 2022.

Mr. Chairperson,

Distinguished Members of the Peace and Security Council,

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to address you today, and appreciate the invitation extended to me, on this solemn occasion in commemoration of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, during which a million people were deliberately and systematically killed in less than three months. My mandate as Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, is global. I raise awareness of the causes and dynamics of genocide, alert relevant actors where there is a risk of genocide, and advocate and mobilize for appropriate action.

Last year, my first year in office, I visited Rwanda to honor and pay respect to the victims and survivors of the Genocide.

We must never forget the victims and the survivors of the Genocide. We must honour each and every one of the victims, whose lives, hopes, dreams and aspirations were cut short by senseless violence that built upon explicit calls to destroy an entire group, based on who they were.

Honoring also means accepting our responsibilities. The commemoration of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda will always remind us of our collective failure to prevent, in spite of clear signs of what was coming.

We failed to protect those innocent civilians because we failed to recognize the warning signs of impending violence.

Ladies and gentlemen, my Office is the United Nations focal point on hate speech. The United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech represents the commitment of the UN to address and counter hate speech globally. As we know, there is no universal definition of hate speech. The UN Strategy, domiciled in my office, introduces a working definition of hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other forms.

In Rwanda, hate speech was there for all to hear; messages of hatred were not communicated through whispers, ear to ear, but through megaphones, village by village and in the airwaves. The Tutsi were dehumanized through hate speech.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is unquestionable that hate speech played a significant role in spreading the hatred that made this genocide possible. Through the media, the government and *Interahamwe* militia called for the cleansing of “their society”. When the perpetrators launched their mission to eliminate the Tutsi and moderate Hutu, the ordinary people who joined the killings had psychologically been prepared to destroy the Tutsi. The first weapon of choice in this genocide was not the panga, the machete; it was the spoken word, it was hate speech.

The main lesson for us is that the first line of response needs to come way before violence is imminent. The adjective “early” is often associated to the concept of warning, which is essential, but does not sufficiently accompany the concept of response. The cost of this gap, when the risk is too high, can be unbearable.

Our commitment to honor the victims of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and moderate Hutus requires doing everything in our hands to prevent and to stop dynamics that can lead to the commission of genocide. When it comes to prevention, we must do more, and we must do better.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has often stated that acknowledging the past is a vital step towards rebuilding trust, and that reconciliation means rejecting denial of genocide and war crimes and of any effort to glorify convicted war criminals. It also means recognizing the suffering of all victims and not attributing collective guilt. In Rwanda, this means accepting that the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) determined conclusively that a genocide was committed against the Tutsi in Rwanda. This constitutes an important step towards accountability, re-establishing peace and security in Rwanda and promoting reconciliation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I have done previously, I would also like to take this opportunity to commend Member States that have ratified the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. But far too many have not taken that step yet. I continue to reach out to them to prioritize universal ratification of the Convention and full implementation of its provisions.

My Office remains committed to strengthen our cooperation with the African Union in the prevention of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and their incitement. Let me conclude by reassuring you of the commitment of the United Nations for the prevention of such crimes, for which every actor, from the highest placed and most powerful to the lowest, in cities and small communities in near and distant locations, will remain essential.

Thank you