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“Genocide on Our Watch?”

Racism, at its worst, leads to genocide – the attempt to wipe out an entire racial, ethnic, national or religious group, in whole or large part. Despite post-Holocaust calls for “Never Again,” the United Nations and the international community generally have failed to prevent genocide in Rwanda, Srebrenica and elsewhere.

As the current carnage in the Darfur region of Sudan reminds us, the world is still far short of achieving an effective global commitment to stop mass slaughter in its tracks.

Yet if preventive *action* remains problematic, in recent years the UN has made strides in developing preventive *warning* systems and indicators for genocide. On the tenth anniversary of the Rwanda genocide two years ago, Secretary-General Kofi Annan proposed a genocide action plan that included the new post of a UN special adviser on genocide, who would report to the Security Council through Annan.

Respected human rights expert Juan Mendez was named to the post. Although he was blocked by US Ambassador John Bolton from addressing the Security Council last fall, Mendez’ report and recommendations for stronger action on Darfur were presented in writing to all Council members. They have helped to create a diplomatic climate in which more effective action may yet be taken.

But Darfur, at this late date, is no longer a situation where “early warning” is at issue. More recently, Mendez warns of the potential for conflicts to escalate into genocide in such other African countries as Congo, northern Uganda and Ivory Coast. Mendez is also a contributor to a new report by a non-governmental group, Minority Rights Group International, which identifies the top five “peoples under threat” in 2006 as minority groups in Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan and Myanmar.

Considering that United States troops are currently in two of these countries – Iraq and Afghanistan – and were recently in a third – Somalia – it especially behooves Americans to take note of these warnings.

How does one identify groups at risk of genocide? Last October some 15 potential indicators of genocide were published by a UN Committee of experts, which oversees the UN Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. The US is among 170 countries that have joined this treaty. Our former Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, Ralph Boyd, is one of the 18 experts who sit on the Committee.

The Committee’s indicators warn of potential genocide in countries where the following apply, especially in combination:

- lack of laws to prevent and remedy racial discrimination,
- official denials of the existence of certain groups,
- systematic exclusion of groups from positions of power,
- use of identity cards indicating racial or other group identity,
- grossly biased versions of history in school curricula,
- forced removal of minority children for the purpose of assimilation,
- segregation in such areas as schools and housing,
- systematic hate speech, especially in the media,
- racist statements by political and other leaders,
- violence against minority groups prominent in business or government,
- serious patterns of individual racist attacks,
- militia or extremist groups with racist platforms,
- large refugee flows or displacements of minority group members,
- significant socioeconomic disparities among groups,
- policies to block humanitarian assistance to vulnerable groups.

Even where many of these factors are present, case by case analysis is essential to detect potential flash points. Predicting genocide is an art, not a science.

But we already know enough that our press, our public and our politicians should take note, beginning with those countries – Iraq and Afghanistan – where our military is currently engaged. The issue is not merely whether our policy in those countries is wise, but how to avoid the ultimate moral stain of presiding over a genocide.

Doug Cassel's commentaries are broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.