

Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

In July 2004 the UN established the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, which acts as an early warning mechanism for the UN Secretary-General and is tasked with collecting and assessing information on serious abuses of human rights that could lead to genocide and other flagrant infringements of international humanitarian law. In July 2012 the Secretary-General appointed Adama Dieng of Senegal as his Special Adviser in this capacity.

Given the close and complementary nature of their work, in 2009 the Secretary-General proposed the establishment of a joint office to merge the role of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and that of the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect. However, this proposal has failed to move forward due to deep disagreement about institutionalizing the concept of “responsibility to protect.”

Building upon the work of his predecessors, Dieng has sought to continue raising awareness of the causes and dynamics of genocide. His office has developed an analytical framework that

identifies factors that can be used to assess the risk of human rights crimes and violations. Further, the office seeks to alert relevant actors where there is a risk of genocide or other serious humanitarian abuses, and to advocate for and mobilize appropriate action. As part of this effort, it operates in close collaboration with a multitude of entities within the UN system, including the Departments of Political Affairs, Peacekeeping Operations, and Field Support.

These measures were especially pertinent in the wake of the challenges that confronted the Security Council in 2012. In March and June the Special Adviser watched closely and expressed alarm at the increasing violence and deepening sectarian divisions in Syria and warned that inaction would heighten the risk of further mass atrocities. His office has also continued to monitor developments in Sudan and South Sudan with regard to continued attacks on civilian populations.

The office of the Special Adviser has also sought to increase its cooperation with regional and subregional organizations,

emphasizing the importance of a regional approach in the prevention of mass atrocities. For example, in April 2012 the Special Adviser took part in the meetings of the African Union’s High-Level Implementation Panel on Sudan and South Sudan. The office has also participated in the meetings of the International Committee on the Great Lakes Region. In addition, the office seeks to establish links with the Southern African Development Community and the League of Arab States.

In April 2012 the United States launched the interagency Atrocities Prevention Board, signifying a major commitment at the national level to prevent genocide and mass atrocities. This development underscores the important contributions of member states in strengthening their national capacities to complement and support the UN’s response capability. Notwithstanding achievements in this regard, the international community’s challenge will be to solidify these gains and to provide actionable and effective response to genocide and mass atrocities in the future.