

To what extent should the UN intervene in genocide?

Alex Koutelias

AICE Global Perspectives

Sarasota High School

Word Count: 1976

When the United Nations was formed in 1945, the founders made one of the primary goals of the new organization the need to prevent future genocides, such as the Holocaust that had just occurred. Following the UN's formation, the strength of the organization was tested to see how it could intervene in crisis situations like genocides. Since the foundation of the UN, there have been twenty plus genocides, some of which the UN intervened in and some of which the UN did not intervene in. Consequently, members and proponents of the UN as well as critics of the UN have wondered what responsibility the UN has for intervening in genocide. Each of the genocides had various results depending on whether or not and how much the UN intervened. This applies to one's world because the citizens of the world cannot move forward together to solve larger problems, such as climate change and population control, when genocide is occurring in the midst. The UN should intervene in genocide because it is their duty to protect the rights of humans, to prevent genocides before they occur, and to make sure the perpetrators get tried by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Conversely, the UN should not intervene in genocide because of the right of countries to national sovereignty and also because the UN causes a multitude of new problems in each country they intervene in. Personally, the UN should work with countries to prevent genocide and if a government is perpetrating genocide, then the UN should have the right to intervene. The following discussion is a heavily needed one so that the UN can adjust its policies to meet the demands of the citizens of the globe.

According to S. Toope (2000), President of the University of British Columbia and expert in human rights, the charter of the UN requires that it must protect the human rights of the citizens of the globe. The UN's duty to protect human rights is one of their highest priorities. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki moon of South Korea (United Nations Preventing, 2010) said on January 15, 2010 that "Goals related to the responsibility to protect should also inform our development and peacebuilding work, not just our efforts in the areas of human rights, humanitarian affairs, peacekeeping, and political affairs." If the UN intervenes in a country with a high risk of genocide and eliminates political and economic differences, the UN is able to protect the rights of the people there (United Nations Preventing, 2010). The UN website is extremely reliable because it comes from the UN itself, and not from some intermediary source. However, the website also has a lot of partiality towards the UN as the rightful protector of human rights because the website was written by the UN. By improving human rights, the UN can lessen tension between groups of people. If human rights are in danger in countries where genocide is likely, the UN should intervene and protect human rights and prevent a possible genocide.

Another suggested way the UN should intervene in genocide is in the prevention of it. The UN (United Nations Office, 2011) has an Office of the Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide. This Special Advisor collects information from within the UN regarding human rights violations and actions that may lead to genocide, acts as an early warning for the Secretary-General, makes recommendations on how to prevent or halt genocide, and enhances the UN's ability to analyze information about an occurring genocide (United Nations Office, 2011). This page of the UN website is extremely insightful for understanding the role of the Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide's responsibilities, as well as other aspects of genocide prevention.

Like the other web page on the UN website, this webpage's preference is towards the UN as the primary actor in genocide prevention. Other high ranking members of the UN have made plans to intervene in order to prevent genocide. One such example is former Secretary-General Kofi Annan of Ghana. Annan made a 5 Point Action Plan to Prevent Genocide in 2004 in remembrance of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Rwandan Genocide (Annan, 2004). His five points were: to prevent armed conflict, protect civilians by sending in UN peacekeepers, capture the perpetrators attempting to commit genocide and try them in the International Court, gather information and make early warnings through the Special Advisor for Genocide Prevention, and for the UN to take rapid and decisive action (Annan, 2004). Annan's plan is a clear example of what the UN would seek to do in the event of genocide. The UN website (United Nations Preventing, 2010) backs up Annan's plan by repeatedly stating on the website that prevention is the best way to stop genocide. The UN should take preventative measures and intervene in order to halt genocide.

Furthermore, the UN should intervene in countries in order to indict the perpetrators of genocide for war crimes. Since the Armenian Genocide, international tribunals have been set up in countries to try the perpetrators of genocide. Following World War II, the Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials provided the basis for the international court as it is today (Toope, 2000). The international court system of trying criminals has been the most successful of UN intervention methods. The UN Security Council most of the time favors indicting perpetrators of genocide. The trials for Bosnian and Rwandan perpetrators are still occurring and the victims are finally receiving justice (Totten, 2005). Samuel Totten, a member of the Council of the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide, points to two primary examples of how UN judicial intervention is changing the way the world views genocide. Firstly, the International Criminal Tribunal for

Rwanda (ICTR) found Jean-Paul Akayesu, the former mayor of Taba, Rwanda, guilty of the crime of genocide, in September of 1998 (Totten, 2005). This was the first time in history that an international court reached the verdict “crime of genocide.” Secondly, Totten (2005) explained the significance of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) on July 17, 1998 which gave the ICC full jurisdiction for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. This statute was applied to the ICTR and the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) (Totten, 2005) and is significant because the world sees criminals being put in jail or executed for committing the crime of genocide. Genocide is a much harsher word than war crimes or human rights violations and sends a sterner message to the population of the world of what genocide constitutes and that the UN will not put up with it. Therefore, the UN should intervene in genocides in order to try the perpetrators by the ICC.

While the United Nations demands the right for intervention (United Nations Preventing, 2010) in a country with an ongoing genocide, it also admits that genocide prevention and mediating is the duty of the state. According B. Meyer’s report (2009) in the newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*, Ohio’s largest newspaper and winner of several Pulitzer Prizes, too many nations in the history of the world have used the term “responsibility to protect” as an excuse to colonize and intervene in the domestic affairs of countries for selfish reasons (Meyer, 2009). Examples of this assault of national sovereignty for supposedly protective reasons occurred in Mughal India and Qing China as a result of European imperialism. Meyer further points to the fact that the UN often cannot intervene in genocide because China and Russia, both permanent members on the UN Security Council, veto most of the drafts that call for breaking national sovereignty of countries (Meyer, 2009). The reason for China and Russia’s vetoing is more than likely that they are worried that the UN will want to break their own national sovereignty and intervene in the

human rights problems in their own countries, such as the Russian oppression of the Chechens or the Chinese oppression of the Tibetans. Samuel Totten (2005) shares both sides of this difficult question in his journal. Totten believe that the UN should not break the national sovereignty of nations even when there is a genocide occurring (Totten, 2005). While the UN wanted to send peacekeepers to Burundi during the Tutsi Genocide of 1993-1994, the Burundian government refused to let the peacekeepers enter (Totten, 2005). When a government invites peacekeepers to their country, the UN should supply as many peacekeepers as it can, like Indonesia's request for peacekeeping intervention that helped to end the East Timorese Genocide in 1999 (Totten, 2005). Totten believes that the UN is a political organization and that it should not become mainly for humanitarian purposes (Totten, 2005). Totten takes a radically different stand point than Meyer however on the concept of "responsibility to protect" (Meyer, 2009). Totten argues that individual countries should intervene to stop an occurring genocide such as when India intervened in the Bangladeshi Genocide of 1971 or when Vietnam intervened in the Cambodian Genocide of 1975-1979 (Totten, 2005). National sovereignty is an extremely important factor to consider when it comes to intervening in genocide. The UN, as an NGO, has to respect the laws and desires of countries. If the UN can intervene at random in situations, then it would be difficult to stop a country from intervening in another country for an arbitrary reason.

Likewise, many people are against the UN intervening in genocide because the UN often causes more problems in an already tumultuous area. Professor Mats Berdal of Kings College in London and Director of the Conflict, Security, and Development Research Group for Academia Europaea (2005), believes that the UN does not train the peacekeepers enough. Furthermore, they are not given detailed instructions once they are deployed (Berdal, 2005). Finally, he states that the UN does not give them enough resources on the ground that permits them to do anything

positive for the situation (Berdal, 2005). Professor Berdal is trustworthy as a source because of his vast experience in dealing with conflict resolution and international relations. More detailed results of UN intervention were explained by S. Hunnicutt (2008). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UN peacekeepers have raped children and forced women into prostitution (Hunnicutt, 2008). Claims have also been made that UN peacekeepers spread AIDS to Cambodia during the 1990s by raping women there (Hunnicutt, 2008). Worst of all, reports from Kosovo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea mention women and young children being forced to do sexual favors for UN peacekeepers in return for medical supplies, food, and water. (Hunnicutt, 2008).

However, given that there is little biographical evidence about S. Hunnicutt, it is hard to consider this source as valid as the UN webpages, Totten, Meyer, or Annan. On the other hand, all claims of human rights violations and crimes done by the UN are nearly impossible to trace since all the peacekeepers come from many different countries, which is why not too many scholars have treated this perspective of UN intervention seriously. Consequently, the UN should not intervene in genocide until more data is collected and more allegations verified as to what crimes the peacekeepers have committed against the people they are supposed to be protecting.

In summary, there are many different perspectives as to what extent the UN should intervene in genocide. The UN should intervene in genocide because it is their duty to defend human rights around the world, to thwart genocides before they occur, and to make sure the perpetrators get tried by the International Criminal Court (ICC). In contrast, the UN should not intervene because of the right of countries to national sovereignty and also because the UN creates a horde of new problems in countries where they intervene. Starting this research and essay, one thought that the UN should intervene in genocide because it was its duty. After doing a plethora of research, one could come to the conclusion that UN intervention is not as simple as

it sounds. Many political, cultural, and economic factors are involved in the decision of whether or not or how much to intervene in a genocide. More research is needed to further analyze the points touched on in this essay, including the overall success of UN intervention in Rwanda, East Timor, and other countries that had genocide recently. Without understanding more opinions and making more compromises between countries and other countries and the UN, the problem of genocide will never be solved.

## References

- Annan, K. (2004). *Un secretary-general kofi annan's* . Retrieved from <http://www.preventgenocide.org/prevent/UNdocs/KofiAnnansActionPlantoPreventGenocide7Apr2004.htm>
- Berdal, M. (2005). The united nations, peacebuilding, and the genocide in rwanda. *Global Governance*, (11), 115-130.
- Hunnicut, S. (2008). *Un peacekeepers have harmed those they are supposed to protect*. Greenhaven Press. Retrieved from [http://find.galegroup.com/ovrc/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=Relevance&prodId=OVRC&tabID=T010&subjectParam=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3AFQE%3D%28su%2CNone%2C14%29United+Nations%24&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R3&displaySubject=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&qtPosition=18&qrySerId=Locale\(en,\):FQE=\(SU,None,14\)UnitedNations\\$&subjectAction=DISPLAY\\_SUBJECTS&inPS=true&userGroupName=fl\\_sarhs&sgCurrentPosition=0&contentSet=GSRC&docId=EJ3010477207&docType=GSRC](http://find.galegroup.com/ovrc/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=Relevance&prodId=OVRC&tabID=T010&subjectParam=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3AFQE%3D%28su%2CNone%2C14%29United+Nations%24&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R3&displaySubject=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&qtPosition=18&qrySerId=Locale(en,):FQE=(SU,None,14)UnitedNations$&subjectAction=DISPLAY_SUBJECTS&inPS=true&userGroupName=fl_sarhs&sgCurrentPosition=0&contentSet=GSRC&docId=EJ3010477207&docType=GSRC)
- Meyer, B. (2009, July 21). U.n. debates when world must violate national sovereignty to protect civilians against genocide. *The Plain Dealer*. Retrieved from [http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2009/07/un\\_debates\\_when\\_world\\_must\\_to.html](http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2009/07/un_debates_when_world_must_to.html)
- Toope, S. (2000). Does the international law impose a duty upon the united nations to prevent genocide?. *McGill Law Journal*, 46, 188-194.
- Totten, S. (2005). The united nations and genocide. *Society*, 6-13.
- United Nations. (2011). *Office of the special advisor on the prevention of genocide*. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/>
- United Nations. (2010). *Preventing genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes*. Retrieved from [http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/un\\_role.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/un_role.shtml)