



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

**Tenth Anniversary of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)
Implementing R2P in the Geneva Context – a Focus on Prevention
*Room XX, Palais des Nations, 19 November 2015***

Remarks by Volker Türk, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

I am pleased to be here to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Responsibility to Protect. Over the past decade, the international community has made progress towards realising the three pillars of the R2P aimed at preventing and responding to atrocity crimes. There is growing consensus on the underlying principles of the R2P. They have been referenced in numerous resolutions at the UN, regional, and domestic levels, and focal points and special procedures have been created. The UN Framework of Analysis is perhaps one of the most salient examples of how these principles are being translated in practical terms.

At the same time, we have encountered significant challenges, most notably in the area of prevention, and it is timely that this is the theme of our discussion today. From the perspective of UNHCR, I would like to speak to two issues that we encounter in our work, specifically in relation to the prevention of atrocity crimes that characterise so many violent conflicts: namely the connection between these crimes and the escalating rates of displacement we are seeing today, and how humanitarian actors can contribute to prevention in meaningful and complementary ways.

Growing numbers of persons are displaced each year, often fleeing violent conflicts in which atrocity crimes are perpetrated with impunity. In the last five years, more than 15 violent conflicts have erupted or been reignited, all of which have triggered displacement, and many of which have targeted minority groups, as we have seen, for example, in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Syria, and Iraq. We now live in a world where more than 59.5 million persons are displaced either internally or across borders – the highest number since World War II. Some 80 per cent are women, children, and youth, and nearly nine of out every ten refugees are living in developing regions. Also, more than 10 million persons are stateless, sometimes as a result of discriminatory laws and practices leading to serious human rights abuses.

Displacement is rarely an isolated event. More and more, refugees and internally displaced persons tell us how they have been forced to move multiple times, fleeing from one area to another, and often then on to other countries. Moving onward may be the only protective coping mechanism available to people who have lost so much in flight. As political solutions remain elusive, situations of displacement become protracted. With few options for voluntary repatriation to their home countries, or integration in their host communities, many refugees will take the step of trying to find solutions further afield, even at significant risk to their lives. The situation in Europe speaks to these growing levels of fear and desperation, where more than 800,000 have made the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean in this past year alone.

These trends highlight the urgent necessity of finding ways to address the reasons why people are compelled to flee. To be effective in our prevention efforts, we must examine the root causes of violent conflict and displacement, and frame our approaches accordingly. Conflicts that give way to atrocity crimes may, for instance, be exacerbated by poverty, extremism, and ethnic or sectarian marginalisation. Impunity for human rights violations, poor governance, and corruption point to failures in the rule of law. Trafficking in arms contributes to the commission of violent crimes. Competition over resources, resulting from urbanisation, environmental degradation, natural disasters, climate change, water scarcity, and food insecurity can be both causes and consequences of violent conflict. They can give rise to discrimination, displacement, and crimes against whole groups of people. Given the growing salience of these issues in today's global refugee and migration dynamics, understanding and addressing root causes will be the theme of this year's High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges.

States have the responsibility to protect civilians from atrocity crimes, but where they are unable or unwilling to do so, the international community must step in, and has done so repeatedly. There is a spectrum of possible actions that can help prevent or respond to atrocity crimes. Humanitarian missions, monitoring, and shuttle diplomacy undertaken by States, for example, have been employed in numerous conflicts over the past decade.

Humanitarian actors also play a role – both in helping to prevent atrocity crimes and in addressing their deeper and interlinked root causes. Many are well situated to do so, having specific areas of expertise and continued engagement with local communities. Experience has reminded us to be ever mindful of the need to uphold the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, and to be wary of the potential for our actions to be instrumentalised by parties to a conflict. While retaining our non-political character as humanitarian actors, it is nonetheless important to maintain a high level of political awareness in order to identify early warning signs, assess protection risks, and explore the potential for solutions to displacement.

To help prevent the commission of atrocity crimes, humanitarian actors monitor serious rights violations, assess threats, and proactively plan for protection and solutions. They negotiate with warring parties to end or reduce violence, strengthen protection of civilians, and facilitate humanitarian access. Their continuous protection presence and situation analyses, including for civilians in besieged areas, help to identify those most imminently at risk. Active operational involvement also ensures that refugees are able to access asylum systems and are not returned to situations where they may face persecution, including grave violations of their human rights.

In some cases, humanitarian actors are faced with the question of whether to evacuate or relocate people from besieged areas as a measure of last resort to protect groups at immediate risk, as was the case in the Central African Republic, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. These were situations that called upon us to make difficult decisions, and they taught us to be clear about what can and cannot be done and the risks entailed in ensuring the safety of these groups. Such complex operations require careful assessment, consultation, planning, and leadership at all levels.

Within their remit, humanitarian actors also help to address the causes of violent conflict and displacement by taking action to protect and empower marginalised groups. They act to protect minorities, promote gender equality, and resolve statelessness. They work to strengthen the rule of law, and encourage rights-based approaches to development. Through community-based approaches, they strengthen social cohesion and promote peaceful coexistence by fostering dialogue between communities and reducing intra-communal tensions.

Prevention also entails measures taken post-conflict to stabilise situations so that violent conflicts do not recur. Humanitarian actors contribute to this effort by supporting safe, voluntary repatriation, peacebuilding, and reconstruction processes. At the same time, they work with governments to secure solutions for those who are unable to return. This includes not only durable solutions of local integration or resettlement, but also expanded opportunities for legal status through labour mobility schemes, the right to work, humanitarian admission, family reunification, access to education, and changes in nationality and citizenship laws, to name a few.

Against this backdrop, there is considerable scope for strong and substantive collaboration. We have seen this of late, for example, in the UN Secretary-General's 'Rights up Front' initiative, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and the plans for the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. The world – more than ever before – needs our whole focus on prevention of atrocity crimes and violent conflicts, the fulfilment of sustainable development aspirations, and strong multilateral cooperation to address the manifold causes of displacement today.

Thank you.