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SPOTLIGHT ON R2P

First Meeting of the Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC)



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Noel Morada (left), with Tibi Galis (Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation), Don Deya (International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect), Naomi Kikoler (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect), and Keith Porter (Stanley Foundation) speaking in the plenary session on expectations of academe and civil society groups about GAAMAC.

The inaugural meeting of the GAAMAC was held in San Jose, Costa Rica on 4-6 March 2014. Some 120 participants from the United Nations, states, academe, and civil society groups across the globe discussed various issues and challenges relating to the promotion of genocide and mass atrocities prevention in the three-day meeting organized by the governments of Switzerland, Argentina, Costa Rica, and Tanzania in cooperation with the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights of the Harvard School of Public Health, the Stanley Foundation, Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, Genocide Studies Program of George Washington University, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, and the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect. The Australian government also provided funding support for the meeting. As a state-led

initiative, GAAMAC is focused on assisting states, in partnership with academic institutions and civil society groups, to develop national and regional capacities for the prevention of the four crimes covered by R2P—genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. It also aims to serve as a platform for exchange and dissemination of learning and good practices in the prevention of these mass atrocity crimes.

The meeting centered on the importance of building national architectures for atrocity prevention. Among the main issues raised in these sessions were as follows:

- No society is immune to atrocity crimes and that prevention must begin at home;
- Ownership by both the state and society is key to an effective mass atrocity prevention;
- Past atrocity crimes must be dealt with accordingly and acting against impunity are essential in preventing the recurrence of mass atrocities;
- Implementation of international norms against mass atrocity crimes remains a challenge;
- States need to acknowledge their primary responsibility in protecting populations;
- Setting up early warning systems by itself will not prevent atrocities if there is failure in timely and decisive response;
- Understanding the root causes and dynamics of mass atrocities are important in their prevention at the earliest possible stage; and
- Prevention of mass atrocities should be a permanent priority in the national agenda of states.

Participants agreed that building a national architecture for prevention of mass atrocities requires: 1) an appropriate legal framework; 2) identification of relevant actors and stakeholders who will be involved in the process; and 3) funding allocation in the national budget. Accordingly, each country should adapt its national architecture to its domestic context.

In view of the above, participants also agreed that the role and function of GAAMAC will be to: 1) help facilitate dialogues on atrocities prevention and complement existing networks and initiatives between governments, regions, and civil society actors; 2) serve as a platform for exchange of ideas and good practices among these stakeholders; 3) foster synergies among communities involved in promoting R2P, genocide prevention, security sector

reform, transitional and international justice, and responsible business practices; and 4) facilitate access to national capacity building efforts by linking needs and opportunities for training, knowledge, and technical support based on expertise by states and civil society stakeholders.

In the last plenary session of the meeting, representatives from academe and civil society groups were given the opportunity to deliver brief statements about their expectations about GAAMAC.



Closing session of the GAAMAC meeting, with government representatives (from left): Thomas Koningsfeldt (Denmark), Federico Villegas Beltran (Argentina), Mo Bleeker (Switzerland), Saul Weisleder (Costa Rica), Felisitas Mushi (Tanzania), and Noel Campbell (Australia, R2P Focal Point).

Noel Morada, representing the Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, underscored the importance of sustained partnership between states, experts from the academe, and civil society stakeholders in building homegrown national architectures for prevention of mass atrocities. He also echoed the point raised by one of the speakers in the meeting about the need for building knowledge systems in societies as key to preventing mass atrocities.¹ With regard to GAAMAC as a platform for exchange of ideas on good practices, Noel also stressed the need to foster South-South dialogue among the Asia Pacific, African, and Latin American regions. Other speakers in this session underscored the legitimate role played by civil society organizations in building national resilience and in assisting states through education and training in mass atrocities prevention. As well, the need for building trust and confidence between states and civil society groups was also raised, specifically in the context of overcoming their mutual suspicions and prejudices that often arise with issues related to human rights protection and impunity especially in many developing countries in the Global South.

A Chairman's Statement based on the first meeting of GAAMAC is being finalized for publication in April. Among the next steps being considered following the inaugural meeting in Costa Rica are the following: 1) setting up a hub, including a website,² for mapping of existing structures, networks and resources that will be made available to the community of states and non-state stakeholders; 2) developing a mission statement and a set of principles that will be considered for discussion in the next GAAMAC meeting, which will be held in 2015; and 3) reaching out to other states and invite them to participate in the next convening of GAAMAC. As this state-led initiative moves forward in creating a global "community of commitment" in mass atrocities prevention, it is quite important to seriously consider the following practical points that were raised by some participants in the meeting: 1) GAAMAC has to remain an informal network that should not duplicate the work of existing institutions and networks on mass atrocities prevention; 2) participation by states should continue to be voluntary; and 3) efforts should be made in ensuring that in future meetings of GAAMAC, participation of states and other stakeholders from various regions are not only well-represented but, more importantly, given space in the conversation table to express their concerns and share their learning experiences and good practices in mass atrocities prevention.³

¹ According to Jennifer Leaning of the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights of the Harvard School of Public Health, a knowledge system is more than just the use of communications and information technology and aggregating data. It involves interpretive capacity, where experienced human minds play a critical role in prevention of mass atrocity crimes. They are the best not only in analyzing data and patterns, but above all, in understanding and interpreting what the patterns mean. The task of a knowledge system is to have a seasoned interpretation of one's society and be able to respond appropriately to the situation.

² For more details about GAAMAC website, please see www.gaamac.org.

³ In the inaugural meeting of GAAMAC, for example, the Asia Pacific region was not well-represented compared to Latin America and Africa.

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