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Why Congress Must Pass the Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act

March 1, 2016 [Timothy Hirschel-Burns](#) 0 [Comment](#) [congress](#), [Genocide](#), [politics](#)

At the start of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, General Wesley Clark remembers staff officers at the Pentagon asking whether Rwanda's primary ethnic groups were called Hutus and Tutsis or Tutus and Hutsis. Compare this with the recent case of Rwanda's neighbor, Burundi, which also has a history of ethnic conflict, including the deaths of

over 300,000 in 1972.

Well over a year before Burundi's controversial elections scheduled for 2015, the U.S. Atrocities Prevention Board identified the country as facing the risk of mass atrocities, conducted a months-long review process, and implemented programs to promote reconciliation and resilience.

They were right about the risk of conflict, and Burundi remains in the midst of a political crisis prompted by last year's election and that has killed hundreds. Yet the violence has not turned ethnic and the death toll remains well below what it could be. Continued engagement is required to ensure the crisis does not escalate further. I do not mean to suggest that without U.S. intervention Burundi would have had a genocide on par with Rwanda's, but the early U.S. response has certainly played a substantial role in limiting the scale of Burundi's conflict.

Why was U.S. policy so much better this time around? A major reason is that in 1994 the Atrocities Prevention Board, the orchestrator of the U.S. early response to Burundi, did not exist. Through support of the Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, Congress can ensure the U.S. government has permanent mechanisms to effectively predict and prevent mass atrocities.

The bill, introduced to Congress in early February, has three components. First, it would replace the Atrocities Prevention Board's temporary mandate with a permanent one. The high-level working group brings together agencies including the Pentagon, the State Department, the U.S. Mission to the U.N., USAID, the CIA, and the National Security Council to coordinate atrocity prevention. Second, the bill reauthorizes the Complex Crises Fund, which provides flexible funding to USAID to respond to emerging conflicts. Last, the bill ensures all Foreign Service officers receive training that will help them see the warning signs of atrocities and respond to them. In Rwanda, the U.S. lacked both the political will and the institutional capacity to adequately respond. The Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act signals that atrocity prevention is a central foreign policy priority and ensures the U.S. government has the ability to respond.

But why should atrocity prevention matter to members of Congress? Most simply, it is the right thing to do. I doubt a single member of Congress looks back at the Holocaust or Rwanda and does not think more should have been done in response. Furthermore, the earlier the response to atrocities, the fewer lives lost.

Significantly, atrocity prevention also serves the United States' interests. Rather than having to weigh the option of putting the lives of American soldiers on the line in the midst of a conflict, early response to atrocities allows for the effective use of diplomatic and other nonviolent strategies. Also, as shown in Syria, mass atrocities are extremely destabilizing to neighboring countries and global security.

Furthermore, atrocity prevention is unbelievably cost-effective. The entire U.S. program to reduce atrocity risk in Burundi in the buildup to the 2015 elections cost just \$7 million. In 2015 alone, the U.S. spent \$1.5 billion on aid to Syrian refugees, a country only about twice the size of Burundi. This is not to mention the enormous costs of military operations in Syria and the disruption to American businesses operating in the region.

Atrocities prevention is a bipartisan foreign policy priority. While their actions have not always matched their rhetoric, President Reagan and every president since has spoken of the importance of atrocity prevention. The Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, introduced by Senator Tillis (R-NC) and Senator Cardin (D-MD), puts this sentiment into action.

Pennsylvania Senator Bob Casey has shown tremendous leadership in the fight against atrocities, signing on as an original co-sponsor to the bill. Senator Pat Toomey still has the chance to match Senator Casey's leadership and become a co-sponsor. Not only does this bill support American security and will help save countless lives, it is firmly in line with Senator Toomey's strong commitment to saving precious American tax dollars.

It has taken far too long for the U.S. government to prioritize atrocity prevention. Millions of people have been slaughtered as the U.S. stumbled to create the basic prerequisites to effectively prevent atrocities. The U.S. has spent an exorbitant amount of money and has had its own security threatened from conflicts that could have been prevented. U.S. atrocity prevention policy has failed both the U.S. and victims of atrocities. The Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, on the other hand, is a win-win.

Image Courtesy of www.endgenocide.org