

International action

Working together to prevent atrocities



Preventing genocide requires a global effort: Countries, international groups, and nongovernmental organizations all have a role to play in defusing potentially catastrophic situations.

Increasingly, the international community has looked to the UN and its peacekeeping operations to prevent or halt mass violence. In the last 10 years, the number of missions has tripled as UN peacekeeping has proved to be a versatile tool for addressing conflicts and humanitarian crises. The “Human Security Report 2005,” a major international study on peace and war, noted that global security had improved dramatically between 1988 and 2001, with the number of genocides and political mass murders plummeting by 80 percent. The study attributed this decline to an increase in conflict prevention, peacemaking, and

rebuilding countries after conflict, especially by the UN and its peacekeeping missions.

UN peacekeepers face challenges

However, genocide and mass atrocities still occur. A series of crises in the 1990s—in Bosnia (Srebrenica), Rwanda, and Sierra Leone—made it clear to the world that ordinary people remain the target of unspeakable violence. Since then, the demand for peacekeeping operations has risen substantially, and trends suggest that it will continue to climb.

In recent years, the UN Security Council has sought to improve peacekeeping operations by increasing their focus on protecting civilians. But UN peacekeepers need support to carry that

work out effectively. The UN routinely struggles to cobble together funding, sufficient troops, civilian staffers, and the vehicles and equipment they need. More training and support in planning their missions would allow peacekeepers to improve their ability to protect people.

To ensure that the job gets done—that whole populations won’t face the horrors of genocide—UN member states need to provide peacekeeping missions with the resources they require. And the US, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is a central player in this imperative.

Above: Young girls return from school inside Zam Zam camp for internally displaced people in North Darfur, Sudan.
UN Photo / Stuart Price

What the US can do

The US can take a number of steps to provide needed support, including:

- **Provide sufficient and timely funding.**

The US has supported UN peacekeeping initiatives for 60 years, a responsibility it shares with 191 other UN members. Countries other than the US provide more than 100,000 peacekeeping troops and cover almost 75 percent of mission costs. These missions promote America's interests by disbanding fighters, facilitating humanitarian efforts, and creating conditions for political reconciliation. And they are cost-effective: According to the US Government Accountability Office, UN peacekeeping missions are one eighth the expense of fielding a comparative US force.

But the US is not meeting its financial obligations for these missions in a timely manner—and that can dangerously slow the UN's ability to respond to a crisis. The Obama administration and Congress have recently seen to it that the US has caught up on its back dues, but a policy of deferring payments for nine months and capping

US peacekeeping contributions is gumming up the system. The result is the US shortchanges the UN by two percent of its total budget each year. Delayed payments discourage countries from contributing troops and slow their deployment in the first few months of a conflict. And civilians, exposed to waves of violence, are the ones who suffer.

The US can help address this problem by permanently removing the arbitrary peacekeeping spending cap imposed by Congress on peacekeeping contributions and paying its UN dues by January 1 of each year.

- **Offer equipment and training.**

Peacekeeping operations, which depend in part on voluntary contributions, often don't have the resources they need. This is especially true in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan, where their size, lack of roads, and insecurity make it extremely difficult to reach people. For example, the missions in Chad, Darfur, and DRC together are struggling with a shortage of more than 50 helicopters.

The US can offer more direct support to these missions through its

Global Peace Operations Initiative. Training peacekeepers on civilian protection and providing them with tools they need would allow them to respond more effectively.

- **Strengthen the UN's ability to protect civilians.**

The UN is developing guidelines and improving its planning so peacekeeping forces can better protect people from violence. To ensure civilian protection is a robust part of future operations, the US should assist UN efforts by supporting training and guidance development and by ensuring that police and other actors—who can be trained by the US—have a role.

- **Enhance regional organizations.**

In addition to helping strengthen the UN's peacekeeping efforts, the US should offer similar help to international partners who want to prevent mass atrocities. Organizations such as the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Economic Community of West African States, and NATO may have more legitimacy to intervene in certain countries or regions. The US should help them with guidance and training on the protection of civilians.

