

Statement by Argentina at Security Council Meeting on: Threat to International Peace and Security: Prevention and Fight Against Genocide

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(Unofficial Transcript)

First of all, Madam President, I would like to convey the solidarity of the people and the Government of Argentina to the people and the Government of your country, Nigeria. Humankind has no right to suffer.

Argentina does not sponsor draft resolutions for reasons of technical or timely factors that may or may not be present in a given draft resolution. As in this case, we do so when the goal of the draft resolution entails reaffirming the absolute validity and unquestionable force of the purposes and principles of the United Nations, in particular the promotion and protection of human rights and the individual freedoms of all without distinction of any sort. We also do so because that is State policy in our country. We do so when, as in this case, we have no doubt that the international community must set aside its feint-heartedness to raise its voice in the certainty that only memory, truth, justice and reparations will prevent the repetition of massive crimes of atrocity such as the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994 — and not just in Rwanda, but throughout the entire world. We do so when not doing so would run counter to the legal and moral imperative we have as Members of the Organization and of the Security Council, but especially as men and women who share a common humanity.

In the face of the horror he faced, an Argentine thinker said that genocide was the context in which, with dark and monstrous evidence, one could see the absolute evil that naked power was able to do to other human beings. All genocide raises the most important of questions: where lies the ever-present, dark abyss of humankind, wherein the roots of our own society are found? At the same time, we know that all human tragedy is, collectively and individually, an impetus for a new beginning. Rwanda knows that, as do we peoples who have suffered genocide, State terrorism, massacres and mass killings. We know that tragedy means a new beginning. It demands one. It is an opportunity to think anew about what it means for us to build a society. We know that transitions are not easy or the same, nor do we undergo them in the same way. Here, too, one cannot impose on a people that it build memory in a single way. One question leads to another and it seems there are no definitive answers. Like victims, memory is unique. Memory is creative.

That is why remembering genocide does not mean shedding light on a set of fragmentary experiences or a list of horrors and random events. It would be obscene to do so. Remembering genocide is to seek meaning, for there exists a horrendous abyss within society as well as within ourselves. That abyss separates us from the past that horrifies us and the idea that the future demands that we think, believe and trust that the life to which we want to do justice and the world we deserve to live in can be different. We need to make the world different, beginning today. We can do so with truth, memory, justice and reparations, because for our people the future means the present that exists in our memory.

As has been pointed out, Argentina was a member of the Security Council in 1994. On 16 May of that year, following the introduction of the report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Rwanda (S/1994/565), we had no hesitation in saying (see S/PV.3377) that, since the events of 6 April — the atrocious violence, abuse and systematic slaughter that had been unleashed — Rwanda had found itself plunged into a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions and a situation of horror for which there was no justification whatever. At that time, Argentina claimed that systematic and widespread violations of humanitarian law in Rwanda, as well as all human rights violations that had stunned the world, should be thoroughly investigated. In July of that same year, when mass slaughter of communities and families — not only majority Tutsi, but also Hutu and others who had denounced the violence and horror — confirmed that the atrocities committed in Rwanda qualified as crimes of genocide, Argentina unequivocally affirmed that crimes of such magnitude must not be covered up or minimized, or enjoy impunity.

In that context, and in the memory of the victims, this commemoration represents a valuable opportunity to reflect on the three dimensions that we must bear in mind when we speak of genocide.

First, the protection of populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity — including incitement to hatred — has only one name: prevention.

Secondly, we must strengthen human rights norms and international humanitarian law, democratic institutions and a social culture in which the recognition and respect for differences and diversity alienate us definitively from an ideology of hatred that is not of the left, right or centre. The ideology of hatred is the ideology of hatred, in which hell is other people. We must therefore strengthen not only substantive law but our ethical conscience and the legitimate foundations of national and international democratic society.

Thirdly, with respect to the fight against impunity, I recall that my mother used to cite Saint Theresa, saying that more tears have been shed over prayers that have been heard than over those that have not. We live with that reality every day. Every single day, we hear the prayers being said and we see the tears being shed. What matters is our decision to listen, because these are the voices of the victims. It is not only a question of having a good normative architecture or solid and just legal institutions. We need to fundamentally change the concept of power that is still hegemonic. We need to change social practices that are still discriminatory. We need to change political cultures that are still based on humiliation.

Yesterday, I noted that many need to see to believe, as Saint Thomas said. But in the case of genocide, we need to believe in order to see. We can come here time and time again with our prayers and our tears, we can point to the suffering of the victims, but people may not believe that these things constitute genocide. They may believe that no massacre has occurred. That is why we feel that reality is based on a genuine consciousness. When we truly feel abhorrence towards violence as a means of resolving conflict; when we rebel peacefully against the overwhelming use of power to resolve conflict with weapons or through economic means of humiliation, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide will not only be an excellent legal text, compelling and committing us to act, but also a reality for all humankind.

Among the three dimensions of prevention, the strengthening of norms and the culture of human rights and international humanitarian law, and the fight against impunity, I wish to stress that of prevention. The Secretary-General and Mr. Eliasson, whom I thank for his presence at this meeting, have convened us under a theme that is not a slogan; it is a call to place rights up front. Since it is not a slogan and these are not just words, we must heed this call. To put rights up front is a synonym; it is the antonym of placing disputes over power first. It is to place the human rights of all human beings first.

To prevent is to assume responsibility to protect. To prevent is to listen to individuals, regional organizations and the people of every nation State who can give voice to their experience and not to papers issued from ivory towers that merely imagine what others may be going through. To prevent is to continue to strengthen international human rights law. To prevent is to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, which we drafted with France. To prevent is to recognize the right to truth as a right. To prevent is to strengthen, not to destroy, the International Criminal Court so that it is fairer, more consistent and more effective.

I should like to conclude by emphasizing prevention in societies that have experienced genocide. What can we do in its aftermath? How do we imagine the future? How can we believe in the future? How does a society — not individuals, but society as a whole — emerge from this once it has fallen victim? Does it survive by exacting further punishment or by enforcing more human rights? Through more repression or more freedom? Through more discrimination or more equality?

If the prevention of the recurrence of genocide in all societies that have lived through it is based on a political and social scenario in which the culture of fear persists and is perpetuated by the mass media, and in which we are overwhelmed by a culture of suspicion against the dark-skinned, the young, the poor or the immigrant, it may be that punitive tendencies will flourish and massacres recur. Let us look at the populations of the prisons in all our countries and how they got there. To the extent that repression is a response to what we perceive as a potential threat, we may be justifying new genocides.

Chesterton says in one passage that policemen should be philosophers. It is not just a matter of looking for criminals in their hideouts, he says; it is not a matter simply of arresting thieves so as to live in peace. One must go into the elegant halls to detect the pessimists. Who are the pessimists? Those who entertain the frightful thoughts that lead to fanaticism, intolerance and the conviction that hell is others. There is no useful moral relativity when we speak about human rights. It is only on the basis of human rights that we can talk about cultural relativism. There can be no impunity when we speak of violations of human rights, because they are not a matter of opinion. We have talked about this often.

Allow me a gesture in commemoration of the genocide in Rwanda and in thanks to the Ambassador of Rwanda. I have brought for the Ambassador and for the people of Rwanda, on behalf of human rights organizations and of my country and Government, a symbol of our fight against the pessimists, because therein lies our hope. I have here a handkerchief of the mothers

and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. But it is not really a handkerchief; it was the diaper of the babies who had been kidnapped or who were born in the concentration camps.

We were never victims; we were never pessimistic. We will always work so that power does not humiliate us and so that the world may be ours.