Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

Background on the Position

At the 2004 Stockholm International Forum on “Preventing Genocide: Threats and Responsibilities,” the former Secretary-General of the United Nations (UNSG), Kofi Annan proposed creating a Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide (SAPG) who would be supported by the High Commissioner for Human Rights and would report directly to the Security Council. The creation of this position made the link between massive and systematic violations of human rights and threats to international peace and security clear, a link that is often ignored until it is too late.

In July 2004, the Secretary-General appointed Juan Méndez, Argentinean human rights lawyer, former President of the International Center for Transitional Justice and current Special Rapporteur on Torture to the post. The mandate of the SAPG, based on Security Council Resolution 1366, is to collect existing information, (particularly from within the UN system), act as an early warning mechanism, and make recommendations to the Security Council through the Secretary-General.

In May 2006, former UNSG Kofi Annan appointed a high-level Advisory Committee on Genocide Prevention to provide guidance and support to the work of the Special Adviser and contribute to the broader efforts of the United Nations to prevent genocide; however the panel's recommendations were never released.

The post of Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide was vacant from March 31, 2007 when the mandate of Juan Mendez expired, until the new UNSG Ban Ki-moon appointed Francis Deng as the Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide on 29 May 2007.

Changes to the Special Adviser Post

Upon appointing Francis Deng, Ban Ki-moon also announced his intention to find other ways to strengthen the UN's genocide-prevention capacities. In accordance with this goal, in August 2007 Ban proposed upgrading the position from Assistant Secretary-General to Under-Secretary-General and making it a full-time post, in line with the never-released 2006 recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Genocide Prevention.

In line with another recommendation from the committee to expand the Special Adviser's title, Ban Ki-moon also proposed changing it from ‘Prevention of Genocide’ to ‘Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities’. Additionally, Ban Ki-moon proposed changing the name of the position from Special Adviser to Special Representative.

As a result of discussions within both the Security Council and General Assembly, the SAPG position was assigned Under-Secretary-General status, but remained the ‘Special Adviser’ rather than a ‘Special Representative’, and the title was not changed to include Mass Atrocities. Additionally, the SAPG was increased from a part-time position to full time.

Mr. Deng worked closely with the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, Edward Luck, to elaborate a revised mechanism within the UN system that would be able to collect and analyze early warning information as well as provide early warning material and
recommendations for action to the Secretary General and Security Council. The Secretary-General in his report on ‘Implementing the Responsibility to Protect’ expressed his intention to propose a joint-office which would incorporate the mandates of both the SAPG and the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, in the Annex section of his report. This intention became a reality – SAPG Adama Dieng and Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect Jennifer Welsh currently occupy the joint-office. For a detailed timeline on the creation of the position click here.

Current Special Adviser: Adama Dieng (2012-present)

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed Adama Dieng of Senegal to the post of Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide on 17th July 2012.

Mr. Dieng has had a distinguished career beginning as Registrar of the Regional and Labour Courts in Senegal before serving for six years as Registrar of the Supreme Court of Senegal. From 1982 to 2001 Mr. Dieng was Executive Secretary and then Secretary-General of the International Commission of Jurists. During this time Mr. Dieng also served as the Envoy of the UN Secretary-General to Malawi (1993) and the UN Independent Expert for Haiti (1995-2000). In January 2001 he was appointed as Registrar of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

Mr. Dieng has worked throughout his career for strengthening the rule of law, fighting impunity and advancing capacity building of judicial and democratic institutions in countries threatened by instability and conflict. He has supported the establishment of several non-governmental organisations in Africa and worked as a consultant for many international organisations including the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the African Union, UNESCO and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Mr. Dieng was a board member of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and continues to serve as a board member of the Africa Leadership Forum.

Mr. Dieng played a prominent role in the establishment of the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the draft African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption.

In his first three years as SAPG, Adama Dieng has been vocal on the continued risk of genocide in the 21st century. In 2014 on the 66
anniversary of the signing of the 1948 Genocide Convention, Mr. Dieng stated that no country is immune to the risk of genocide. Mr. Dieng has recognised the positive impact of RtoP in the prevention of mass atrocities, but has also acknowledged shortcomings, such as the failure of the international community to adequately address the ongoing crisis in Syria.

In May 2015 Mr. Dieng visited Burundi to meet with government representatives and discuss the need to prevent and investigate political violence and killings. Mr. Dieng urged the government to guarantee respect for human rights, including freedom of expression and opinion. He also called upon all parties to engage in open dialogue to resolve the crisis and calm tensions in the country.

In August 2015, Mr. Dieng, alongside the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect Dr. Jennifer Welsh, released a statement entitled, ‘Fulfilling our Responsibility to Protect in Yemen’. Later in September 2015, Mr. Dieng and Dr. Welsh released another joint statement on the crisis situation in Yemen, which condemned the “virtual silence” of the international community in face of the ongoing suffering in Yemen.

Mr. Dieng continues to be a vital partner in the advancement of RtoP as it relates to his own role, as the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide.

Former Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide

Francis Deng (2007-2012)
Juan Méndez (2004-2007)