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For 65 years, a failure on genocide

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If Raphael Lemkin were alive today, I wonder what he would think about Syria. And about Darfur, Burma, Congo and the Central African Republic.

And about us.

Lemkin, a Polish Jew, fled from the Nazis and escaped to the United States. He tried desperately to get his family to safety, but 49 of his relatives — everyone except one brother — perished in the Holocaust.

Lemkin was a gifted linguist and a lawyer. He became convinced that there had to be a word to describe the killing not of people, for which we have words such as suicide and homicide, but the killing of a people, an entire group. We assume that this word has always been part of our vocabulary, but at the time of the Holocaust the word did not exist. Lemkin coined the word genocide, taking *geno* from the Greek for family or tribe and *cide* from Latin for killing.

Once he had the word to describe the crime, Lemkin was determined that there should be a law to prevent and punish it. He wrote the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and, through his indomitable determination and persistence, the convention was adopted by the United Nations in December 1948, 65 years ago this month.

When a convention or a resolution passes in the U.N., it doesn't automatically become part of our nation's law. A convention has to go through the advise-and-consent process. The president sends it to the Senate, where it has to be ratified by 67 affirmative votes, two-thirds of the Senate, and then it goes back to the president for final approval.

The U.S. didn't ratify the Genocide Convention for another 40 years.

The late Sen. William Proxmire, a Democrat from Wisconsin, took up the task in the 1960s of getting the convention ratified. He assumed it would be easy. However, he gave 3,211 speeches on the floor of the Senate, a different speech every day for 19 years, until it was ratified.

It took two more years before President Ronald Reagan finally signed the measure into law on Nov. 5, 1988 — in a hangar at O'Hare Airport in Chicago.

What an ignominious story of the U.S. stand against genocide.

I believe Lemkin would be outraged and embarrassed by us. As individuals and as nations, we have failed Lemkin — and millions of innocent victims. After the genocide of the Holocaust, the world said "never again," but the list of genocides since then is long and sorrowful: Cambodia in the 1970s, nearly 2 million dead; Rwanda, 1994, 800,000 dead; Bosnia, 1990s, 200,000 dead; Darfur, the first genocide of the 21st century, 400,000 dead and rising.

And today? The U.N. warns that the situation in the Central African Republic is bordering on genocide. Samantha Power,



Raphael Lemkin coined the word genocide and wrote the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Lloyd's Photographers/Associated Press,

U.S. ambassador to the U.N., recently noted that this has been referred to as “the worst crisis most people have never heard of.” Britain and the U.S. have pledged millions of dollars in humanitarian aid, and France has promised 1,000 soldiers in an attempt to bring some stability. Thousands have died and more than 400,000 are displaced in a crisis producing unbelievable acts of violence — public executions, beheadings, entire villages razed to the ground.

In Syria, we have a “red line” against chemical weapons — but what about the 6 million people who are internally displaced? And the 11,000 children who have died? And the outbreak of polio, a disease nearly eradicated from the planet — except when conflicts like this erupt?

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo an estimated 6 million people have perished in the past 20 years in fighting that is a spillover from Rwanda’s genocide. Where is the “red line” for rapes and sexual brutality in what is the worst place on the planet to be a woman?

On Monday, we will mark 65 years since the U.N. ratified the Genocide Convention.

I believe Raphael Lemkin would weep.

We must — and we can — do better.

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