

GENOCIDES IN THE 20TH CENTURY AND LESSONS TO HUMANITY

(A Brief Reflection)

His Holiness Aram I

This is the text of a lecture given to the International Conference on “Lasting peace in Africa”, April 17-18, 2004, in Kigali, Rwanda.

The 20th Century was an age of genocides, and the list is depressingly long: Armenians, Jews, Cambodians, Kurds, Tutsis, Croats, Muslims, Albanians. The international community was always slow to respond to these mass killings, and in some cases it simply ignored them.

My people were victim to the first genocide of the 20th Century. One-and-a-half million Armenians were brutally massacred according to a well-planned and carefully and systematically executed programme of the Ottoman-Turkish government during the First World War. This attempt aimed at the extermination of the Armenian nation as a nation was part of the so-called pan-Turanian policy of the Ottoman Empire in the context of which the existence of the Armenians was a major obstacle. Therefore, we Armenians know, out of our existential and painful experience, all about the far-reaching consequences of genocide.

I want to condense my reflection in four points:

1) TOWARDS THE PREVENTION OF NEW CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

The frightening thing is that nothing has changed. Today, as in 1915, ethnic conflicts are shredding the fabric of many societies; hatred is hardening into ideology and violence in its most horrible forms is being expressed in the name of God. Only the international community can effectively prevent new genocides. But it will only be effective if it acts with a strong will immediately, wherever and whenever new evils generate mass atrocities. It must act on the basis of moral and human values, and not according to geopolitical and strategic interests.

The United Nations has taken important steps in its attempt to prevent genocides. It ratified the Genocide Convention in 1948 and followed that immediately with the Declaration of Human Rights. In 1998, 120 states established the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, The Netherlands, which has jurisdiction over genocide. These serious steps have not prevented genocide. The ICC’s attention is on the crime that has been committed and not on the crime that must be prevented. The international community must go beyond these juridical commitments and processes. It must impose its political will in positive ways; it must create early warning systems, and build public awareness, education and dialogue. Wherever applicable, it should impose diplomatic

and economic sanctions and in extreme situations, when all else has failed, engage in humanitarian intervention.

2) THE MEMORY OF GENOCIDE: A SOURCE OF LIVING TRUTH

Individually and collectively, people live with memory, and memory lives through them. Memory links the present to the past and conditions the future, thereby ensuring continuity and affirming identity. Collective memory is history. Nations are formed around their common memory. It sustains their existence, maintains their unity and gives them a sense of belonging. Collective memory tells the untold history of a people; it is a living source of truth. It challenges bias and partial information and builds awareness. With this awareness comes the possibility of accepting or calling for responsibility.

Only when we become aware and accept responsibility can we move to repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. With genocide this process is crucial. Wipe out the memory and you wipe out the possibility of justice. Leave the untold story untold and you will never stop the cycle of violence. Leave people unaware and they will be that much more easily victimized. Hitler understood this well. He used the fate of the Armenians at the hands of the Turks in 1915 to justify his plans for extermination. He knew that memories were short. “Who today,” he asked, “remembers the genocide of the Armenians.” Well, today, some people, for political motives, do not “remember the genocide of the Armenians”; others refer to it as an “alleged” genocide. The Armenian people, however, live the memory of genocide vividly in their daily life. That memory is deeply rooted in their common consciousness. Is this not true also with the Rwandan people? We have so many painful experiences, so many stories of violence and images of suffering that must be shared with others, not as an expression of hate and intolerance, but as a challenge to move to repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

3) THE RECOGNITION OF GENOCIDE: THE WAY TOWARDS JUSTICE

The truth that is preserved by memory must also be told: “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matthew 5: 15). Only then will that truth be recognized. If it is not recognized, there will be denial, because without recognition there can be no awareness and without awareness there can be no responsibility and accountability. Any individual, community or government that does not recognize and then accept responsibility for genocide commits a crime against humanity.

To accept the truth of genocide and the responsibility for it takes great courage and does not come easily. It can only result from a process of self-critical reflection, a search for self-understanding. The individual, community or government must reread their history in an inter-relational context. Only through such a self-assessing, self-critical and self-purifying process will the truth become clear.

Different “Truth and Reconciliation” committees that have been established provide the space in which the difficult experience of self-criticism and the understanding of truth are being discussed by victim and offender together. These new models have been partially successful and we must build on them. It is however vitally important to remind ourselves and the international community that the confession and the acceptance of the truth is a pre-condition for dialogue, justice and reconciliation.

We must avoid models that are guided by political agendas; often, governments will refuse to acknowledge that crimes have been committed and will, therefore, not accept responsibility for them. In the 20th Century some genocides have been acknowledged and others have been denied. Where they have been acknowledged, communities and nations are moving towards justice and reconciliation. Where they have been denied, the wound of injustice is still festering.

4) IMPUNITY: CONTINUOUS GENOCIDE

In situations where communities or governments will not acknowledge and take responsibility for genocide, justice may only be achieved through a punitive approach. However, according to many jurists, existing criminal systems and juridical procedures emphasize the criminal and not the victim; in this way, the courts attempt to affirm human rights and promote justice by punishing the criminal. However, real justice can happen only when the rights of the victim are strongly recognized and addressed as well.

Restorative justice is a new development in the criminal system. It opens new dimensions in both the preventive and punitive approaches. It is a victim-centered system. Restorative justice aims to restore dialogue by bringing together the offender and the victim for reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa is a concrete example of this process. Restorative justice must also include retributive justice. The first generates healing by creating space for dialogue, and the second leads to community building and reconciliation. For there to be true justice and accountability, there must be reparation, restitution and compensation for the victims.

Punitive measures through the ICC and the new paradigms arising from the “Truth and Reconciliation” committees are essential to avoid continuous genocide, because impunity perpetuates injustice, which, in turn, generates acts of revenge in an endless cycle of violence. It also generates new forms of injustice and violations of human rights. Offenders should be held accountable to humanity. Many offenders have not yet been brought to justice and held accountable for their acts. Impunity means granting *de facto* amnesty. If we can bring single criminals routinely to justice, why can't we bring governments or nations to justice as well?

Some of the genocides of the 20th Century have been recognized and retribution has been made. For example, in Rwanda retributive justice is being established both through the United Nations and through the government and people of Rwanda. However, the Armenian genocide remains unpunished. Restorative justice could be the

model both for the Armenian Genocide and for other crimes against humanity still awaiting justice.

CONCLUSION

Respect for human rights is crucial to any process aimed at the restoration of justice, permanent peace and reconciliation. Over the past 56 years, the United Nations has sought to implement the Declaration on Human Rights by adopting international covenants related to specific areas of human rights, including genocides. However, these attempts have not prevented millions of people from falling victim to atrocity, repression and genocide. Again and again, governments have ignored their commitments to these covenants, bypassed them and acted unilaterally. The cries of the victims of human rights violations are still heard all over the world.

Humanity should heed the painful lessons that it has learned from the genocides of the 20th Century and use that knowledge to build a world where peace with justice is established and memories are reconciled. In today's world, globalization challenges nations, religions and cultures to engage with one another in meaningful dialogue and creative interaction. We must move beyond interaction and dialogue to reconciliation by recognizing the truth and accepting each other. Negation and denial will not promote dialogue, restore justice, build peace or achieve reconciliation.

In the 20th Century humanity paid dearly for a policy of silence in the face of genocide. It must not be silent in the 21st Century. Here is the painful lesson that we carry with us. Here is also the great challenge before us.

**ARAM I
CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA**