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Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,
Excellencies, Colleagues and Friends,

It is an honour to have this opportunity to interact with you again on the implementation of my mandate as Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide. I will speak today both about progress made and about some specific and serious concerns that I have that are affecting implementation of this important mandate.

As I have said to you before, the Human Rights Council plays an important role in advancing preventive action. This is a privileged body with a strong voice that should be at the forefront in alerting to the risk of atrocity crimes, and in calling for early and effective action to stop the escalation of tensions that could potentially lead to genocidal violence. I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the important work of the Special Procedures mandate holders in this regard, several of whom my Office has had the privilege of working with closely.

The Human Rights Council has adopted important resolutions in its last few sessions that have drawn the world's attention to the plight of populations at risk - in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Myanmar and Syria, among others. You have made some very concrete and valuable recommendations that I hope will be acted on. I encourage the Human Rights Council to continue considering these and other situations.

I would also like to acknowledge the resolution adopted last year on the prevention of genocide. As a consequence, the General Assembly adopted the International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime and celebrated this day for the first time on 9 December.

Mr. President
Ladies and gentlemen,

You invited me here to update you on progress made in discharging my mandate. I would like to focus my intervention on an issue which is extremely worrying from the perspective of the prevention of genocide and related crimes, which is the increasing and

alarming disregard for international human rights and humanitarian law in many situations of conflict around the world. This development is making atrocity crimes a systematic occurrence rather than an exception.

Last October, the United Nations celebrated its 70th anniversary. Established in the aftermath of World War II, it embodied the hope that never again would civilian populations have to endure horrors comparable to those witnessed during the Wars.

Undoubtedly, the atrocious violence that characterised both World Wars served as a catalyst to place the protection of human life and dignity on the world's agenda and pushed the international community to develop a strong and enduring framework of international law, including human rights law, and to expand international humanitarian law. It was in the aftermath of those wars that the 1949 Geneva Conventions were adopted, which included provisions that for the first time protected civilians during the conduct of hostilities.

Unfortunately, we have betrayed the high expectations generated by those developments. War has continued to be a daily reality, and in the face of our inability to prevent or resolve these situations, I feel that human life has lost its value.

While there has been a reduction in international armed conflicts, there has been a proliferation on non-international armed conflicts, which have become increasingly more devastating and complex. Devastating, because of the staggering loss of human life and the massive humanitarian crises they have generated. Complex, because the nature of conflict itself has changed. We are dealing not only with States but with a variety of armed non State actors, some of which are committing crimes of extreme brutality in the areas under their control. We struggle to find ways to hold these actors accountable. Complex, also, because of the impact of new technologies and military capabilities, which are serving to intensify violence, instead of helping to minimize suffering.

New conflicts continue to surface. Protracted conflicts or cycles of deadly violence, such as those between Israel and Palestine, have not been resolved. In a globalized world, the regional and international implications of tensions, which increasingly assume religious and ethnic connotations, are daunting, particularly in the Middle East.

Armed conflicts are extreme situations, in which parties in dispute resort to violence to solve their differences. This does not mean that no rules apply. In fact, if there is one situation that needs to be strictly regulated and monitored, it is precisely that situation where resorting to force is legitimate. But perhaps there has never been a time when the legal commitments made by States have seemed to be just so much paper. The suffering of the millions of civilians caught in the middle of wars is testimony of this failure.

We are right now hearing of countless reports of deliberate attacks against civilian targets or civilian populated areas and the use of weapons that do not distinguish between military and non-military targets. I am referring, for example, to the targeting of medical facilities in Afghanistan and Yemen, the targeting of schools and wedding parties in Yemen,

the systematic targeting of residential areas on Syria, as well as the use of starvation as a weapon of war.

Cases of extrajudicial killings, mass rape, torture, arbitrary detention, pillage, forced displacement and so many other clear violations of international human rights and humanitarian law committed against civilians have been reported in most of these conflicts. Invariably, people are targeted because of their identity, in particular their religion or ethnicity. At times, these violations portray such a level of cruelty that they question any precept of our humanity.

When I visited Iraq last November, I was shocked and moved to hear first-hand accounts by the Yezidi community of their suffering at the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, particularly the enslavement, rape and murder of women. In the Central African Republic, children have been targeted because of their religion or community affiliation, shot or hacked to death with machetes. They have also been raped, at times even by United Nations peacekeepers.

Civilian objects have also been targeted, including important cultural heritage sites. The recent destruction of the historic Palmyra temples in Syria, for example, and the Timbuktu Mausoleums in Mali, robs humanity of priceless cultural history.

Humanitarian workers and United Nations peacekeepers are unfortunately among those that have fallen victim, including in Mali. In Syria and in the Darfur region of Sudan and in South Sudan, parties to the conflict have several times blocked the delivery of humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations, attacked vehicles carrying humanitarian aid or looted humanitarian supplies. United Nations sites and personnel have been victims of deadly attacks. All these are violations of international humanitarian law.

Urgent action is needed to reverse this trend. We have the legal tools; we have the capacity. Why is it so difficult to gather the political will? In 2005 world leaders assumed a political commitment to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. This commitment gave new impetus to already existing obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law. Ten years on, this commitment still needs to be translated into action.

While I have focused primarily on situations of armed conflict, we must pay equal attention to situations that have yet to reach that level of violence but where patterns of human rights violations, in the context of political or economic tensions, point to a risk of escalation. In this context, I would like to highlight the situation in Burundi, where we have witnessed an alarming surge in human rights violations and abuses committed both by security forces and armed groups, with serious implications for the country's stability and ethnic harmony. I have on several occasions briefed the Security Council about my concerns in relation to Burundi.

We must also pay attention to the aftermath of conflict. Sri Lanka, for example, is at an important stage in its recovery from the civil war and has a chance to make things right, to

invest in reconciliation and an impartial accountability process that would restore confidence and reduce a risk of recurrence of the past violence.

Mr. President,
Ladies and gentlemen,

States must invest in building the resilience of their societies, be it at the national, regional or international level. There are several positive initiatives in this regard. Last month I attended the second Global Action against Mass Atrocity Crimes (or GAAMAC) in Manila, the Philippines. Over three days, delegates from 54 States, more than 50 non-governmental organizations and ten international organizations discussed their experiences in advancing atrocity prevention and the creation of a platform for dialogue, interaction and mutual support.

The regional and national committees of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region's on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity and all forms of Discrimination, the Latin American Network on Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention and the RtoP focal point network are all very concrete State-led initiatives that have been building regional and national capacity in early warning and atrocity prevention. The Group of Friends of the Responsibility to Protect, which is active now in Geneva as well as in New York, is helping to advance implementation of the responsibility to protect. But these efforts can only flourish in an environment where the rule of law prevails.

We need to find ways to face the new challenges and closely monitor evolving scenarios. We need to generate a greater understanding that serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law are very real threats to the maintenance of international peace and security. We must generate a greater willingness to address these situations at an early stage. Protecting civilian lives must be our priority. When rules are respected and ensured, unnecessary suffering, and atrocity crimes in general, can be avoided. Disregarding our obligations and letting others do the same can only lead us to chaos.

I urge you to not let this happen. I encourage the Human Rights Council to bring these issues to the table more often, to raise the alarm at the risk of atrocities, to consistently remind States of their obligations under international law, and to continue to provide support through its mechanisms and policy tools.

Thank you.
