



**Genocide Watch**  
Alliance Against Genocide

## The Ten Stages of Genocide

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Classification Symbolization Discrimination Dehumanization Organization  
Polarization Preparation Persecution Extermination Denial

Genocide is a process that develops in ten stages that are predictable but not inexorable. At each stage, preventive measures can stop it. The process is not linear. Stages may occur simultaneously. Logically, later stages must be preceded by earlier stages. But all stages continue to operate throughout the process.

→ 1. **CLASSIFICATION:** All cultures have categories to distinguish people into “us and them” by ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality: German and Jew, Hutu and Tutsi. Bipolar societies that lack mixed categories, such as Rwanda and Burundi, are the most likely to have genocide.

The main preventive measure at this early stage is to develop universalistic institutions that transcend ethnic or racial divisions, that actively promote tolerance and understanding, and that promote classifications that transcend the divisions. The Roman Catholic Church could have played this role in Rwanda, had it not been riven by the same ethnic cleavages as Rwandan society. Promotion of a common language in countries like Tanzania has also promoted transcendent national identity. This search for common ground is vital to early prevention of genocide.

→ 2. **SYMBOLIZATION:** We give names or other symbols to the classifications. We name people “Jews” or “Gypsies”, or distinguish them by colors or dress; and apply the symbols to members of groups. Classification and symbolization are universally human and do not necessarily result in genocide unless they lead to dehumanization. When combined with hatred, symbols may be forced upon unwilling members of pariah groups: the yellow star for Jews under Nazi rule, the blue scarf for people from the Eastern Zone in Khmer Rouge Cambodia. To combat symbolization, hate symbols can be legally forbidden (swastikas in Germany) as can hate speech. Group marking like gang clothing or tribal scarring can be outlawed, as well. The problem is that legal limitations will fail if unsupported by popular cultural enforcement. Though Hutu and Tutsi were forbidden words in Burundi until the 1980’s, code words replaced them. If widely supported, however, denial of symbolization can be powerful, as it was in Bulgaria, where the government refused to supply enough yellow badges and at least eighty percent of Jews did not wear them, depriving the yellow star of its significance as a Nazi symbol for Jews.

→ 3. **DISCRIMINATION:** A dominant group uses law, custom, and political power to deny the rights of other groups. The powerless group may not be accorded full civil rights, voting rights, or even citizenship. The dominant group is driven by an exclusionary ideology that would deprive less powerful groups of their rights. The ideology advocates monopolization or expansion of power by the dominant group. It legitimizes the victimization of weaker groups. Advocates of exclusionary ideologies are often charismatic, expressing resentments of their followers, attracting support from the masses. Examples include the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 in Nazi Germany, which stripped Jews of their German citizenship, and prohibited their employment by the government and by universities. Denial of citizenship to the Rohingya Muslim minority in Burma is a current example.

Prevention against discrimination means full political empowerment and citizenship rights for all groups in a society. Discrimination on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, race or religion should be outlawed. Individuals should have the right to sue the state, corporations, and other individuals if their rights are violated.

→ 4. **DEHUMANIZATION:** One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects or diseases. Dehumanization overcomes the normal human revulsion against murder. At this stage, hate propaganda in print and on hate radios is used to vilify the victim group. The majority group is taught to regard the other group as less than human, and even alien to their society. They are indoctrinated to believe that “We are better off without them.” The powerless group can become so depersonalized that they are actually given numbers rather than names, as Jews were in the death camps. They are equated with filth, impurity, and immorality. Hate speech fills the propaganda of official radio, newspapers, and speeches.

To combat dehumanization, incitement to genocide should not be confused with protected speech. Genocidal societies lack constitutional protection for countervailing speech, and should be treated differently than democracies. Local and international leaders should condemn the use of hate speech and make it culturally unacceptable. Leaders who incite genocide should be banned from international travel and have their foreign finances frozen. Hate radio stations should be jammed or shut down, and hate propaganda banned. Hate crimes and atrocities should be promptly punished.

→ 5. **ORGANIZATION:** Genocide is always organized, usually by the state, often using militias to provide deniability of state responsibility. (An example is the Sudanese government’s support and arming of the Janjaweed in Darfur.) Sometimes organization is informal (Hindu mobs led by local RSS militants during Indian partition) or decentralized (jihadist terrorist groups.) Special army units or militias are often trained and armed. Arms are purchased by states and militias, often in violation of UN Arms Embargos, to facilitate acts of genocide. States organize secret police to spy on, arrest, torture, and murder people suspected of opposition to political leaders. Special training is given to murderous militias and special army killing units.

To combat this stage, membership in genocidal militias should be outlawed. Their leaders should be denied visas for foreign travel and their foreign assets frozen. The UN should impose arms embargoes on governments and citizens of countries involved in genocidal massacres, and create commissions to investigate violations, as was done in post-genocide Rwanda, and use national legal systems to prosecute those who violate such embargos.

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→ 6. **POLARIZATION:** Extremists drive the groups apart. Hate groups broadcast polarizing propaganda. Motivations for targeting a group are indoctrinated through mass media. Laws may forbid intermarriage or social interaction. Extremist terrorism targets moderates, intimidating and silencing the center. Moderates from the perpetrators' own group are most able to stop genocide, so are the first to be arrested and killed. Leaders in targeted groups are the next to be arrested and murdered. The dominant group passes emergency laws or decrees that grants them total power over the targeted group. The laws erode fundamental civil rights and liberties. Targeted groups are disarmed to make them incapable of self-defense, and to ensure that the dominant group has total control.

Prevention may mean security protection for moderate leaders or assistance to human rights groups. Assets of extremists may be seized, and visas for international travel denied to them. Coups d'état by extremists should be opposed by international sanctions. Vigorous objections should be raised to disarmament of opposition groups. If necessary they should be armed to defend themselves.

→ 7. **PREPARATION:** Plans are made for genocidal killings. National or perpetrator group leaders plan the "Final Solution" to the Jewish, Armenian, Tutsi or other targeted group "question." They often use euphemisms to cloak their intentions, such as referring to their goals as "ethnic cleansing," "purification," or "counter-terrorism." They build armies, buy weapons and train their troops and militias. They indoctrinate the populace with fear of the victim group. Leaders often claim that "if we don't kill them, they will kill us," disguising genocide as self-defense. Acts of genocide are disguised as counter-insurgency if there is an ongoing armed conflict or civil war. There is a sudden increase in inflammatory rhetoric and hate propaganda with the objective of creating fear of the other group. Political processes such as peace accords that threaten the total dominance of the genocidal group or upcoming elections that may cost them their grip on total power may actually trigger genocide.

Prevention of preparation may include arms embargos and commissions to enforce them. It should include prosecution of incitement and conspiracy to commit genocide, both crimes under Article 3 of the Genocide Convention.

→ 8. **PERSECUTION:** Victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic or religious identity. Death lists are drawn up. In state sponsored genocide, members of victim groups may be forced to wear identifying symbols. Their property is often expropriated. Sometimes they are even segregated into ghettos, deported into concentration camps, or confined to a famine-struck region and starved. They are deliberately deprived of resources such as water or food in order to slowly destroy them. Programs are implemented to prevent procreation through forced sterilization or abortions. Children are forcibly taken from their parents.

The victim group's basic human rights become systematically abused through extrajudicial killings, torture and forced displacement.

Genocidal massacres begin. They are acts of genocide because they intentionally destroy part of a group. The perpetrators watch for whether such massacres meet any international reaction. If not, they realize that the international community will again be bystanders and permit another genocide.

At this stage, a Genocide Emergency must be declared. If the political will of the great powers, regional alliances, or U.N. Security Council or the U.N. General Assembly can be mobilized, armed international intervention should be prepared, or heavy assistance provided to the victim group to prepare for its self-defense. Humanitarian assistance should be organized by the U.N. and private relief groups for the inevitable tide of refugees to come.

→ 9. **EXTERMINATION** begins, and quickly becomes the mass killing legally called "genocide." It is "extermination" to the killers because they do not believe their victims to be fully human. When it is sponsored by the state, the armed forces often work with militias to do the killing. Sometimes the genocide results in revenge killings by groups against each other, creating the downward whirlpool-like cycle of bilateral genocide (as in Burundi). Acts of genocide demonstrate how dehumanized the victims have become. Already dead bodies are dismembered; rape is used as a tool of war to genetically alter and eradicate the other group. Destruction of cultural and religious property is employed to annihilate the group's existence from history. The era of "total war" began in World War II. Firebombing did not differentiate civilians from non-combatants. The civil wars that broke out after the end of the Cold War have also not differentiated civilians and combatants. They result in widespread war crimes. Mass rapes of women and girls have become a characteristic of all modern genocides. All men of fighting age are murdered in some genocides. In total genocides all the members of the targeted group are exterminated.

At this stage, only rapid and overwhelming armed intervention can stop genocide. Real safe areas or refugee escape corridors should be established with heavily armed international protection. (An unsafe "safe" area is worse than none at all.) The U.N. Standing High Readiness Brigade, EU Rapid Response Force, or regional forces — should be authorized to act by the U.N. Security Council if the genocide is small. For larger interventions, a multilateral force authorized by the U.N. should intervene. If the U.N. Security Council is paralyzed, regional alliances must act anyway under Chapter VIII of the U.N. Charter or the UN General Assembly should authorize action under the Uniting for Peace Resolution GAREs. 330 (1950), which has been used 13 times for such armed intervention. Since 2005, the international responsibility to protect transcends the narrow interests of individual nation states. If strong nations will not provide troops to intervene directly, they should provide the airlift, equipment, and financial means necessary for regional states to intervene.

→ 10. **DENIAL** is the final stage that lasts throughout and always follows genocide. It is among the surest indicators of further genocidal massacres. The perpetrators of genocide dig up the mass graves, burn the bodies, try to cover up the evidence and intimidate the witnesses. They deny that they committed any crimes, and often blame what happened on the victims. They block investigations of the crimes, and continue to govern until driven from power by force, when they flee into exile. There they remain with impunity, like Pol Pot or Idi Amin, unless they are captured and a tribunal is established to try them.

The best response to denial is punishment by an international tribunal or national courts. There the evidence can be heard, and the perpetrators punished. Tribunals like the Yugoslav, Rwanda or Sierra Leone Tribunals, the tribunal to try the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, or the International Criminal Court may not deter the worst genocidal killers. But with the political will to arrest and prosecute them, some may be brought to justice.

When possible, local proceedings should provide forums for hearings of the evidence against perpetrators who were not the main leaders and planners of a genocide, with opportunities for restitution and reconciliation. The Rwandan *gacaca* trials are one example. Justice should be accompanied by education in schools and the media about the facts of a genocide, the suffering it caused its victims, the motivations of its perpetrators, and the need for restoration of the rights of its victims.

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