



Plea to Great Power Leaders from the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention

27 June 2024

Dear Excellencies, Presidents Xi, Putin, and Biden,

We at the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, a nonprofit and nonpartisan genocide prevention organization headquartered in the USA, are reaching out to you with a plea on behalf of humanity: We ask that you take measures to lead the world away from the crime of genocide and towards greater international harmony, equity, justice, and peace. Prosperity and power in the 21st century will rest on our ability to negotiate peaceful and mutually beneficial solutions to problems that we often otherwise solve with violence.

The world we live in today is on fire. Each one of your governments is implicated in genocide. The shifting power dynamics of this century and the new competitive race for control over the world's land and resources is threatening all of us with extinction. Particularly vulnerable are ancient and indigenous communities worldwide whose wisdom and knowledge we cannot afford to lose.

Without human effort, today's genocidal conflicts will only get worse. At the current rate, in fact, the world will be overrun by genocidal entities and ideologies in a few decades, if not sooner. Climate change and intentionally constructed global inequality are driving a suicidal lack of respect for life among power holders everywhere as well as among some ordinary people. We are all drowning in a value system that creates "unwanted peoples" and then tolerates their displacement and/or murder.

Everywhere we travel people are horrified by the apparent normalization of genocide in global politics.

Therefore, the great power leader who is able to find the courage and the creative methods to prevent genocide and encourage complex and wise approaches to political, territorial, and economic differences – grounded in the respect for life and identity – will go down in history as the person who rose to the immense global challenges of the 21st century and rekindled the strength, resilience, and purpose of the human project. This is an opportunity for courage and heroism.

We hope you all will agree that the world can no longer countenance genocide, whether as a moral wrong, a high crime, or a “practical solution” to problems. With the looming existential threat to the planet, and therefore to the survival of our species, we need greater harmony, peace, and shared prosperity, not war and destruction. Now more than ever perpetrators and facilitators of genocide will experience negative “blowback” for their support for mass atrocity. Genocide and blowback threaten everyone, including the powerful.

Even if you do not agree that humanity can no longer afford genocide, we assume you will agree that genocide causes catastrophic misery and suffering among the target populations, who are but mere human beings. The world has seen the long-term harm that genocide causes, creating cycles of violence that beget more violence. Furthermore, for perpetrators, genocide is a heavy burden to bear – a permanent moral scar that will marr them and the societies that supported them forever, creating savage and valueless norms and institutions – unless demonstrable and far-ranging efforts are made to redress their crimes and the consequences.

Human beings used to justify “the crime without a name” by reasoning that because human beings have always sought to exterminate one another as a means of gaining or keeping power, there is not much we can do about it. This was virtually unchallenged thinking in the Western world until the 1920s, when Raphael Lemkin asked his famous question, “Why was killing a million people a less serious crime than killing a single individual?” Lemkin’s life, his passion, his personal sacrifice, and his suffering remain a righteous challenge to leaders in our century. We are still asking his question.

We write to you because each one of you has the power to encourage humanity to take a different path. It will not be easy, and it will require challenging deeply-held beliefs among the world’s cynical power brokers as well as members of your populations, but it is possible to take the initiative. Each of you has demonstrated that you understand how genocide can take different shapes at different times. In fact, you have called out each other for committing or supporting mass atrocity crimes in the present and the past. We have agreed with each of you in some of your criticisms of the others’ behavior and we fully support a world in which there is dynamic state criticism of mass atrocities committed by other states. Nevertheless, each of you has also failed to turn those keen insights into mass atrocity inwards to examine your own policies.

In the past three years, the Lemkin Institute has called out genocides that each of you has committed or supported. For example, the USA is currently supporting Israel's genocide against the Palestinian people, Russia is pursuing genocide in Ukraine, and China is pursuing genocide against the Uighur community. In the case of the genocide in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) in 2023, there seemed to be support from both Russia and the USA for Azerbaijan and Turkey's genocidal aims. Many other ongoing genocides – in Sudan, Ethiopia, the DRC, and Myanmar, to name but a few – are fuelled by regional and international powers.

We know that our assessments are often rejected by the responsible parties, but we ask you to think about them nonetheless.

We urge you to rise to the challenge of the twenty-first century and begin to design and implement policies that allow all of our different and beautiful identities to exist in security. We believe that humanity is ready for this change. It would be an enormous contribution to human history and the fate of nations if one of you, or all three of you in concert, were to innovate and adopt new forms of responsible governance and new foreign policies, including economic policies, that prevent genocide and support the institutions, values, and structures that allow identity groups to enjoy autonomy and find security in our complex but deeply interwoven world.

Such a future is not a pipe dream. Human inventiveness can be harnessed for creation as well as destruction. There are mechanisms identified by genocide prevention practitioners that can provide a starting off point for new initiatives. We need not be trapped by our past.

We at the Lemkin Institute are at your disposal. We hope you will join us in our quest to free the human species from this particularly onerous and catastrophic crime.