

Atrocities Prevention Board

“Because remembrance without resolve is a hollow gesture. Awareness without action changes nothing.”
— President Barack Obama, April 23, 2012

On April 23, 2012, President Barack Obama announced the creation of the Atrocities Prevention Board (APB), a high-level, interagency group responsible for developing atrocities prevention and response strategies for the U.S. government. The APB builds on last year’s Presidential Study Directive 10, which elevates genocide and mass atrocities prevention to a “core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States.” In addition to ensuring that the government has the necessary structures, systems, and tools to better prevent and respond to mass atrocities, the APB will also be responsible for elevating threatening atrocity situations and making sure that at-risk countries receive appropriate attention from policy makers.

The APB will include high-level representatives from 12 offices: The National Security Council, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the Department of Treasury, the Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security, the Joint Staff, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Office of the Vice President. The National Security Staff Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights will chair the meetings.

Members of the APB will meet monthly to oversee the development and implementation of atrocity prevention and response policy, and additionally on an ad hoc basis to deal with urgent situations as they arise.

Enablers

The creation of the APB recognizes that mass atrocities are organized and complex, often involving third parties that fuel widespread and systematic attacks on civilians. Mass atrocities require a response that mobilizes all the resources of our government to protect civilians and hold perpetrators of atrocities and their enablers accountable. The APB responds to recommendations that Human Rights First has researched and advocated. In particular, we are encouraged that:

- **Enablers of mass atrocities** – individuals, companies, and countries that provide the material and technical means on which perpetrators rely to carry out widespread attacks on civilians – are a specific target of the APB. For example, the Treasury Department will now be able to act more quickly to enact financial tools to block the flow of money to repressive regimes before they build an infrastructure for atrocities.

On the same day that he announced the APB’s creation, President Obama signed an Executive Order authorizing new sanctions on those who facilitate serious human rights abuses in Syria and Iran by providing technology used to monitor, track, and target civilians for attacks. The set of sanctions represents a new tool to combat atrocities by sanctioning not just oppressive governments, but the companies that enable them.

- The **intelligence community** (IC) will undertake three new processes to better anticipate, understand, and counter atrocity threats:
 - 1) The IC will prepare the first-ever National Intelligence Estimate on the global risk of genocide and other mass atrocities;
 - 2) The Director of National Intelligence will include information on mass atrocity threats in his annual threat assessment before Congress; and
 - 3) The IC will work internally and with foreign partners to increase the overall collection, analysis, and sharing of information relating to atrocity threats.

FACT SHEET

This is an important new prioritization because many decisions about action – and inaction – to stop atrocities depend on intelligence. Additionally, comprehensive and improved intelligence will allow policymakers to better and more quickly disrupt the supply chains on which perpetrators rely to carry out their crimes.

- The Department of Defense will routinely **organize exercises incorporating mass atrocity prevention and response scenarios** to test operational concepts supporting mass atrocity prevention and response. Last year, HRF collaborated with the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute of International Peace Studies, and the U.S. Institute of Peace to develop an exercise, called “Shrouded Horizons,” that simulates an escalating mass atrocity situation and the U.S. decision making process. The exercise is designed to provide senior governmental leaders with realistic crisis simulation in order to enhance understanding of complex dynamics and contingencies and serve as a bridge to work across the government.

Recommendations

According to the Atrocities Prevention Board fact sheet released by the White House, the Chair of the APB, in consultation with the Board, will draft an Executive Order for consideration by the President that will, “as appropriate, publicly set forth the structure, functions, priorities, and objectives of the Board, provide further direction for its work, and include further measures for strengthening atrocity prevention and response capabilities as identified in the course of the Board’s work.”

Human Rights First offers the following recommendations and urges the Board to incorporate these recommendations into the Executive Order:

- 1) The Board’s mandate should explicitly include identifying and disrupting third-party enablers of atrocities and require that identifying and disrupting enablers is undertaken in all interagency discussions on situations where atrocities are threatened or are underway, and that enablers be addressed explicitly in policy measures focused on the situations of concern.
- 2) The mandate of the Atrocities Prevention Board should explicitly provide for regular consultation with outside experts as well as with Congress on its work. In order to ensure that the Board has strong support from Congress, we urge the Board to brief interested members of Congress on a quarterly basis for the first year and then annually, or more often as requested.
- 3) Relevant parts of the intelligence community and related agencies should be tasked by the APB with collecting and analyzing intelligence on enablers where atrocities are threatened or are occurring. Policy makers, led by the APB, should ensure that distribution of relevant intelligence, including the forthcoming National Intelligence Estimate on the global risk of mass atrocities, is coordinated and comprehensive. The collection, analysis, and distribution of intelligence on enablers should support policy makers’ efforts to pressure third-party actors on whom the potential or actual perpetrators depend. As necessary, resources allocated to regions at risk of mass atrocities should be increased to ensure adequate human intelligence networks in countries at risk and coordination among those networks monitoring different stages of the supply chain.
- 4) The APB should lead Administration efforts to seek from Congress adequate funding for the Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control to investigate third-party enablers of mass atrocities covered by existing executive orders. The Board should also identify situations that warrant new executive orders allowing for sanctions to be imposed under the International Economic Powers Act.