

HOW TO BUILD THE WILL TO INTERVENE

Concordia University’s human rights researchers are trying to help Western democracies institutionalize their capacity to stop mass killings before they start

At the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, the professors and students don’t just study mass atrocities, they try to prevent them.

The institute, known as MIGS, was founded in 1986 with an office at Concordia University and a grant of \$300. Today it has a worldwide reputation for its capacity-building approach to genocide prevention, and it is an integral part of the university’s departments of history and sociology/anthropology. Its most notable achievement is the adoption by U.S. President Barack Obama of several of its recommendations, as set out in the institute’s Will to Intervene Project.

Will to Intervene was founded by Senator Roméo Dallaire, the retired Canadian general who tried and failed to stop the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and Frank Chalk, the director of MIGS. It aims to persuade Western democracies it is in their national interest to try to stop mass killings from happening before they spiral out of control and lead to transnational threats such as the spread of diseases, piracy and terrorism.

“It’s not something politicians wake up in the morning thinking about,” says Professor Chalk, who founded MIGS with the late Kurt Jonassohn, a Concordia sociology professor whose parents and grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust.

Professor Chalk and Kyle Matthews, senior deputy director of the Will to Intervene Project, will be speaking at The Walrus Talks Human Rights, an event sponsored by Concordia University in co-operation with The Walrus magazine. It will be held at the Isabel Bader Theatre in Toronto on May 7 at 7 p.m.

Researchers at the institute interviewed nearly 100 government officials in the United States and Canada after the Rwandan genocide to understand why Western



Genocide prevention needs to be addressed at the highest levels of government, say Professor Frank Chalk, director of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies at Concordia University, and Kyle Matthews, senior deputy director of the institute’s Will to Intervene Project

governments did not stop the foreseeable killing of 800,000 Tutsis and many moderate Hutus.

Out of that research came several major recommendations: that the leaders of Western countries must declare genocide prevention a national security priority; that they must then create an atrocities prevention board at the highest level of their governments to ensure that intelligence is being received, shared and acted on; and that they must designate a powerful cabinet member to break log jams between the prevention board, the public service and the prime minister or president. Governments must also train their armies in the specialized defence of civilians against mass atrocities, the institute says.

President Obama has done all those things, Mr. Matthews says. But “none of the options recommended to the Canadian government have been acted upon, unfortunately.” Even so, Canada is one

of the few countries with a Parliamentary committee for genocide prevention — an all-party group with about 40 members of Parliament and more than a score of senators. MIGS is the institutional partner of that committee; it supports the salary of a graduate student to arrange briefings for and provide research to the committee members. Sen. Dallaire, Distinguished Fellow at MIGS, chairs the committee. MIGS is now seeking funding to create a global network of parliamentarians with a similar focus.

Intervention is not only a military concept, Mr. Matthews says. “The term ‘intervene’ arises much more often in our work when we discuss getting engaged, intervening diplomatically and economically when our media monitors or Canadian diplomats discover warning signs coming out of a country facing violent conflicts.”

For instance, if dangerous speech inciting ethnic hatred is

being broadcast on local radio stations and in the press, as was happening in Rwanda in the year leading up to the genocide, “there’s a need to put pressure on government leaders and say ‘if you don’t take it off the air we’re going to cancel the visas of your kids who are studying abroad at Concordia, McGill or the University of Toronto.’ It’s using our national power in a way that can make a difference.”

MIGS believes digital media can be mobilized to prevent mass murder. “Social media is a game changer in the world of human rights,” Mr. Matthews says. With the advent of smart phones, people can share images of atrocities in real time, and mobilize diaspora communities. “Social media can amplify human suffering.”

MIGS is setting up a digital laboratory for the prevention of mass atrocities, a first in Canada and perhaps the world, Mr. Matthews says, to fight hate speech and combat genocidal ideologies online, in part by

working with Twitter, Facebook and other major companies to try to shut down the dissemination of hatred.

Radio can reveal when a society is headed toward atrocities, Professor Chalk says. MIGS has 20 student volunteers monitoring radio stations and government media in several languages in the Central African Republic, Myanmar, Mali, Kenya, Nigeria and other countries at risk. It sends warnings to key officials in Canada, the U.S., the European Union and the United Nations.

Mr. Matthews says that perhaps the most important contribution MIGS is making is the creation of the world’s first professional training program for the prevention of mass atrocities, launched last June.

“The institute is not waiting for governments to lead.”

To obtain tickets for the Concordia-Walrus talk on human rights, visit concordia.ca/cutalks. Spaces are limited.

JUST TALKING The prevention of genocide

Proactive measures such as foreign-aid programs targeted at building civil society and fighting hatred, and punitive measures against government leaders, can help avert mass killings, two Concordia University human rights experts say

Q: Why do genocides happen?

Frank: Perpetrators of genocide usually act from one or more of four motives. We created an often-cited typology of motives [Professor Chalk and the late professor Kurt Jonassohn] for our 1990 Yale University Press book, *The History and Sociology of Genocide*. The motives are to eliminate a real or perceived threat, to spread terror among real or potential enemies, to acquire economic wealth and to implement a belief system, a theory or an ideology and impose it on people who would not normally accept it. Often there are overlapping motives, but in most cases of genocide in history, one motive has been salient and others were secondary.

Q: Where does the Holocaust of the Jews fit?

Frank: Within Type Four. The ideological, irrational, but deeply held belief that the Jewish people are part of an international conspiracy to weaken the resistance of a so-called Aryan master race and make it vulnerable to attack and destruction. The idea that in order to permit these imagined Aryans to take their rightful, superior place the entire Jewish people must be annihilated.

Q: What can be done to stop genocides from happening?

Frank: The first thing we need to do is to create the structures within the government of Canada, the United States and other Western democracies to monitor rigorously and provide early warning of looming mass atrocities, and then to create more focal points within governments to coordinate departments and build alliances of countries willing and able to prevent mass atrocities.



Q: How is the world doing at preventing genocide?

Frank: We’re doing better. We’ve had fewer genocides recently than in previous decades. We have actually prevented or stopped some pretty horrific killings in countries lacking nuclear weapons or powerful allies. We stopped the ethno-political killing in Kenya soon after it started and although the story the media created credited the UN for doing it on its own, the real story is more complex and highly instructive.

Q: What is the real story?

Frank: A lot of the most effective action to stop the killing after the 2007 election in Kenya unfolded out of sight and involved targeted threats confronting the leaders of the parties who had mobilized their militants to kill. There was very good intelligence on where they hid their money, where their children went to college and university, where and how often they travelled overseas and for what purposes. It was made very clear to them in simple words that the good times would stop unless they turned off their killing machines.

Frank Chalk is a Professor of History and Director of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies at Concordia University.

Q: What can Canada do to help prevent genocide?

Kyle: Canada was one of the first countries to sign the Genocide Convention. Although we have a legal obligation to act when genocide is looming or underway, we’ve done next to nothing to build any capacity in government to enforce international law. We don’t really have any specialists in the federal government focused on the prevention of mass atrocity crimes. The Obama administration has appointed a genocide prevention focal point, a high-level person at the White House with the authority to bring the military and other officials together to provide policy advice to the president.

Q: Yet Canada has adopted and even spearheaded the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.

Kyle: In the last five years, over 32 national governments, but not Canada, have chosen a focal point on the Responsibility to Protect. If you don’t have a group of people working on this in Ottawa, Canada will never really be making the right decisions. It is equally important for Ottawa to fund research centres in Canada to help the government think about how we can work toward prevention, how we can use foreign aid, travel bans and economic sanctions to try to curb genocidal behavior overseas.

Q: How can foreign aid play a role in preventing genocide?

Kyle: Genocide doesn’t just begin overnight. It starts with groups fighting over resources or people demonizing one particular group. We can use foreign aid at the ground level to reduce conflict and tensions over inequality. We can use foreign aid to support a free media that



doesn’t incite hatred but reports on the truth and diminishes rumours that are often planted in the media by those with a political objective. The U.S. government has asked tech companies and NGOs to try to come up with new ideas about how to use aid to prevent these kinds of human rights abuses.

Q: Tell me about the Canadian Parliamentary group working on the prevention of genocide.

Kyle: When General Roméo Dallaire was appointed to the Senate, there was only one legislature in the world that had a group of parliamentarians looking at the prevention of genocide. It was in the United Kingdom. So Dallaire decided that it would be really important to launch something similar in Canada involving all political parties. It began in 2007, and our institute started supporting it in that year by funding a graduate internship to assist in event planning, communications and outreach. Right now we’re working to find funding with the hopes of creating a global network of parliamentarians dedicated to the prevention of atrocities.

Kyle Matthews is the senior deputy director of the Will to Intervene Project at Concordia University’s Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies.