GENOCIDE PREVENTION THROUGH EDUCATION

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Since 2003, Sudan has been waging a full out genocide against the people of Darfur, a western province of Sudan. Reports say close to 300,000 people have been killed to date and close to 3.5 million people have been displaced and currently live in Internally Displaced Persons Camps where the shelter is minimal and clean water and proper nutrition is scarce. The president of Sudan continues to deny genocide is being carried out by his government, despite the fact that the International Criminal Court had issued a warrant for his arrest in April of 2009 for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

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The international community has seen the crime of genocide committed before its eyes one too many times and has collectively voiced its pledge to prevent the crime from occurring ever again. As our experiences in recent history and current events have shown, this collective call of “never again”, that echoes from the annals of history, along with international laws that govern genocide, are marionettes that prance before past and present victims to genocide. At the fingertips of influential governments of the world, these marionettes tease and taunt, threaten but with a grin, bark with no bite, while countless human beings suffer the unimaginable daily, living out our worst nightmares.

The year 2010 will mark the 95th year of commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. In 1915 the world experienced the horrors of genocide and expressed their disgust towards what the Young Turk regime of the Ottoman Empire was doing to its Armenian subjects. The term genocide had not yet been coined, but the great powers, in a join statement on May 24, 1915, accused the Ottoman Empire of “crimes against humanity”. This was the first time a charge of this sort had ever been made against another government. When Raphael Lemkin coined the term in 1944, he used the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust as his examples, the Armenian Genocide being his primary inspiration to begin researching the phenomena in the 1920’s.

Two thirds of the Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire were annihilated while the rest were assimilated or driven from their homes never allowed to return. The Turkish government continues

to deny genocide had ever occurred and legally forbids the use of the word genocide when referring to 1915. Racism, segregation, vilification, death marches, concentration camps, rape, torture, starvation, exposure, massacre, mass graves, we saw the tools of genocide dating back 95 years, time after time in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Cambodia, Rwanda, and now in Darfur.

Society is in a constant stage of evolution with many negative and positive agents contributing to its transformation. Education is considered one of the most effective methods of bringing forth the much needed positive change in society. Education is used in many scenarios and its existence in many cases is necessary especially in regions struck by atrocities and genocide in order to create and maintain a positive and fruitful environment. As mentioned, the past century has been plagued by the crime of genocide and since the international community's first experience with the crime, world leaders have sworn to prevent it from ever happening again. Genocide and human rights education is the single most important method of prevention. Educating present day and future policy makers and other professionals would indubitably create a tremendous amount of awareness about the nature and dimensions of the crime and what it is that the international community requires in order to defend those vulnerable to the crime of genocide.

The Toronto District School Board has entered its second year of implementing the Grade 11 Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity course in some of its schools. This course has provided secondary school students with the necessary foundations to understand the concepts fused in international human rights and challenges faced by people living in societies where fundamental human rights are not granted or respected. Discussions on identity, discrimination, exclusion lead to discussions on segregation, classification, and genocide. Finally, students leave the course with the necessary knowledge to be able to identify discrimination in society, the root causes of genocide, and understand the need to prevent rather than have to resort to punish.

The International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (IIGHRS), through its many programs and activities, promotes genocide prevention through academic research. The institute's Genocide and Human Rights University Program, implemented for the eighth year in a row, is the only one of its kind internationally. The program brings together international genocide scholars who specialize in the topics they present which range from issues surrounding human rights to international responses, comparative discussions on the Armenian, Jewish, Cambodian, and Rwandan genocides and the ongoing genocide in Darfur.

This year the course was held from August 3rd to the 14th and enjoyed the participation of twenty dedicated graduate students from the Middle East, Europe, South America, and North America, who took up the challenge to tackle the difficult topic of genocide and share their various perspectives they held from their diverse academic and ethnic backgrounds. The students remained engaged throughout the two weeks in the friendly and positive learning environment created in the classroom at Sidney Smith on the University of Toronto Campus.

The dedicated work carried out by the International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies must be commended and held in high esteem. It is programs like Genocide and Human Rights University Program that will make the difference that is much needed and sought after. As an international community, we continuously repeat our demands to implement preventative measures and end genocide around the world,. The IIGHRS takes the proactive approach in the prevention of genocide internationally through the powerful medium of education. I encourage all students to visit the institute's webpage, (http://www.genocidestudies.org/) and inquire about the program, moreover, everyone who is a firm believer in prevention through education, is encouraged to provide their utmost moral and financial support to the program and institute.

It is with the bold steps taken by the likes of the TDSB and the IIGHRS that we will be able to take firm strides towards a solution to this pressing issue. We must harness the strength of education so that one day our collective response to potential genocides brings perpetrators to their knees and saves lives.