Section Header : Genocide

“The term "genocide" did not exist before 1944. It is a very specific term, referring to violent crimes committed against groups with the intent to destroy the existence of the group. Human rights, as laid out in the U.S. Bill of Rights or the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, concern the rights of individuals.

In 1944, a Polish-Jewish lawyer named Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959) sought to describe Nazi policies of systematic murder, including the destruction of the European Jews. He formed the word "genocide" by combining geno-, from the Greek word for race or tribe, with -cide, from the Latin word for killing. The next year, the International Military Tribunal held at Nuremberg, Germany, charged top Nazis with "crimes against humanity." The word “genocide” was included in the indictment, but as a descriptive, not legal, term.

On December 9, 1948, the United Nations approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This convention establishes "genocide” as an international crime. It defines genocide as:

[G]enocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.

While many cases of group-targeted violence have occurred throughout history and even since the Convention came into effect, the legal and international development of the term is concentrated into two distinct historical periods: the time from the coining of the term until its acceptance as international law (1944-1948) and the time of its activation with the establishment of international criminal tribunals to prosecute the crime of genocide (1991-1998). Preventing genocide, the other major obligation of the convention, remains a challenge that nations and individuals continue to face.”