

## Genocide Convention - 1985

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The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods adopted its first resolution in support of the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention in 1949. In the intervening years we have urged our government to ratify this convention many times. The issue is of extraordinary significance and requires extraordinary action.

The convention has been ratified by all major powers except the United States. We urge the Senate to ratify the Genocide Convention and oppose all substantive amendments. As religious women we are concerned that the value of human life never be diminished.

### **Background**

It was the unprecedented Holocaust of World War II that gave impetus to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The genocide treaty declares genocide to be an international crime. With this measure, the nations of the world intended to say that another Holocaust would not be permitted. Even though it was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations and signed by the U.S. in 1948, the signing of the treaty is not binding without consent for ratification by the Senate. Senate approval would allow the U.S. to make a clear moral statement, and failure to ratify the treaty is an embarrassment to this country's protest against the abuses of human rights.

Prepared by the late Raphael Lemkin (who drafted the treaty in offices of the UAHC) the treaty stipulates that genocide, whether committed during peace or war, is an international crime which must be prevented and punished. It defines genocide as the intentional destruction of any national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, in whole or in part, by killing its members, causing them serious physical or mental harm, imposing conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction, imposing measures intended to prevent births, or transferring children from one group to another. According to the Convention, the following are punishable acts whether committed by constitutionally responsible rulers, public officials, or private individuals: genocide, attempt to commit genocide, and complicity in genocide.

Despite the support of all post-world War II Presidents except Dwight D. Eisenhower and the ratification by over 90 countries (representing 3/4 of the world's population), the treaty has languished in the Senate for more than 35 years. Its main opposition has been by some conservatives and members of organizations such as the Liberty Lobby and John Birch Society on the basis that the U.S. should never subrogate its "rights" to international rules—a position which would not allow the U.S. to sign any human rights treaties or be involved in any international organizations.

Currently the Senate Foreign Relations Committee added one amendment and then voted unanimously on May 21 to send the Genocide Treaty to the Senate floor for final approval. The amendment, proposed by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), and supported by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar (R-IN), limits the jurisdiction of the World Court in cases dealing with U.S. Most of the opposition to the treaty has come from conservatives who believe that the World Court is dominated by Third World countries that may use the Court as a podium to express anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments. The Genocide Convention faces a filibuster on the Senate floor from Senator Steve Symms (R-ID). Symms believes the treaty's definition of genocide does not include political genocide and therefore cannot apply to situations such as the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan.