

By Michael Abramowitz

Updated: Monday, December 08, 2008

Over the past several years, President-elect Barack Obama, Secretary of State-designate Hillary Rodham Clinton and Vice President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. have repeatedly urged stronger action to deal with mass violence in places such as Darfur. Now that his administration is taking shape, Obama is looking at how to reorganize the national security apparatus to respond more effectively to threats of genocide.

One guidepost for such efforts may come in a report being released today by a task force led by former secretary of state Madeleine K. Albright, an adviser to Obama and Clinton, and former defense secretary William S. Cohen. Among dozens of steps, the group is recommending that Obama create a high-level forum in the White House to direct the government's response to threats of genocide, focus intelligence analysis on potential cases of mass atrocities, and provide more funds for crisis prevention and response.

The task force concludes that the government is not well organized to prevent genocide. The recommendations would make it easier to take the necessary early action to prevent dangerous situations from escalating into mass violence or crimes against humanity, the members write.

"Preventing genocide is an achievable goal," the report says. "Genocide is not the inevitable result of 'ancient hatreds' or irrational leaders. It requires planning and is carried out systematically. There are ways to recognize its signs and symptoms, and viable options to prevent it at every turn if we are committed and prepared."

Brooke Anderson, Obama's chief spokeswoman on national security, said the transition team will review the recommendations carefully. "President-elect Obama is committed to strengthening U.S. leadership and international efforts to respond to genocide and other humanitarian disasters," she said.

Gordon D. Johndroe, a spokesman for President Bush, said that the White House has not seen the recommendations but that responding to genocide or threats of genocide, such as the situation in the Darfur region of western Sudan or the post-election violence in Kenya, has been a priority for Bush. "We have worked across the government to do it. It requires a lot of international pressure as well," he said.

Most modern U.S. presidents have had to confront some mass violence against civilians, from the killing fields in Cambodia during the administrations of Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter to the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and Rwanda during the Bill Clinton years to the Janjaweed militia attacks on villages in Darfur during the Bush tenure.

Obama and his team come into office with an unusual track record of statements and, in the case of some of his advisers, experience in grappling with mass violence. Two of his closest foreign policy advisers during the campaign, Susan E. Rice and Tony Lake, had senior positions in the Clinton administration and have expressed regret about their failure to respond adequately to the rapid-fire genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

The task force says Obama should create a standing committee of senior officials, directed by the White House, to consider how to respond to genocide threats. It says the intelligence community should prepare the kind of national estimate on worldwide genocide risks that it frequently prepares on other subjects, such as Iran's nuclear capability or conditions in Iraq.

Former Bush U.N. ambassador John C. Danforth, a member of the task force, said a key recommendation was for the new secretary of state to launch a major diplomatic initiative to enlist other countries and organizations into a formal network dedicated to the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities, given what he sees as the ineffectiveness of the United Nations on such issues. "Working through the U.N. is good and important, but I have just seen the U.N. not do anything" in many cases, he said.

The task force was convened by the U.S. Institute of Peace, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the American Academy of Diplomacy.

Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.