Background

The Genocide Convention
The adoption of the Genocide Convention on December 9 was somewhat overshadowed by the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted on December 10, 1948, the next day. The UDHR is invoked today much more frequently than the Genocide Convention, and though there are obvious anniversary commemorations likely being planned for the 70th anniversary of the UDHR, we wish to ensure that the Genocide Convention is also given recognition.

WJC and the Genocide Convention

The WJC also played a considerable role in the enactment of the Genocide Convention. The influential commentary on the Convention was written in 1949, and then republished in the early 1960s, by Nehemiah Robinson, the director of the WJC’s Institute of Jewish Affairs. This is considered an essential resource to this date.

Raphael Lemkin

Briefly, Raphael Lemkin was a Polish lawyer born in 1900. Throughout his whole life, he personified the maxim of “zdeek, zdeek tiradof: justice, justice shall you pursue.” After becoming a lawyer, he was instantly drawn to the idea of mass-killing and bringing those responsible for such atrocities to justice, and he devoted his entire life to doing this.

During the Holocaust, he followed closely the orders published by the Nazis in each of their conquered territories, and quickly formed the opinion that their strategies and techniques were part of a goal to eradicate the Jewish people. Though he saw this early, and in fact tried to warn many people in Eastern Europe, including his extended family, of what he believed the Nazi aims were, few listened, and many lost their lives. During the Holocaust, Lemkin lost 49 members of his family.
In any event, he managed to escape to America, where he published *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, in 1944, in which he coined the term “genocide”, and used it to describe what the Nazis were doing in Europe. When the war ended, he sought to incorporate the crime of genocide into international law, starting, for example, at the Nuremberg Tribunals. His word caught on, and he saw the potential to draft an international law about the law of genocide.

On December 9, 1948, on account of incessant lobbying and “nudging” by Lemkin in the halls of the United Nations in both the United States and Geneva, and with the help of ambassadors from all over the world including the Arab world, Canada, and Australia, the UN adopted the Genocide Convention. The crime now had a name and a definition, and Lemkin spent the rest of his life trying to get every country in the world to ratify this new law.

**Objectives**

This event will present an opportunity for experts in the field of atrocity and genocide prevention to examine and discuss the importance of defining the term genocide and the signing of the Genocide convention, as well as the successes and failures, of the international system in preventing genocide both today and in the past.

1. Bring awareness to the fact that December 9, 2018 was the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the Genocide Convention by the United Nations; and
2. Bring awareness to the fact that Raphael Lemkin, a Polish, Jewish lawyer, whose entire family was wiped out by the Holocaust, coined the term “genocide” and drafted the Genocide Convention.
3. Bring awareness to current systems of Justice for Genocide victims and the role of the international tribunals.

The event will:

- Review the definition of genocide, and what exactly differentiates or connects genocide with phenomenon such as war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity;
- Delve into why genocide persists and the means by which the ideas that fuel them spread. How can these ideas be stopped before gaining support and spreading throughout a given society;
- Discuss the current mission of the UN Secretary General and the UN Office of Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, including what kinds of practices and mechanisms they use to identify and prevent atrocities before they happen, and what proven impact they have had internationally; as well as mechanisms for justice for victims of Genocide.
Programme

Panel Discussion:

- **Mr. Castro Wesamba**, Head of Office, UN Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG). Discussing the Genocide convention today.
- **Liliane Pari Umuhooza** - Survivor of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, Founder of ‘Retreat for Women Genocide Survivors’. Discussing challenges to implementation of the Genocide convention, & justice for Genocide survivors.
- **Chris Harland**, Legal Adviser, Permanent Observer Mission of the ICRC to the UN. Discussing the Genocide convention as a tool for operations and protection work of the ICRC.
- **Menachem Rosensaft**, Lecturer in Law, Columbia Law School; WJC General Counsel. Discussing the definition of Genocide and its role in the past 70 years.
- **Prof. Yehudah Mirsky**, Brandeis University. Discussing the origins of the Genocide convention and Raphael Lemkin’s legacy.

“The Raphael Lemkin Award for exemplary work in the fight against genocide”:
- Presentation of award: WJC JD Adam Hummel (Canada)
- Keynote speech by awardee, Father Patrick Desbois.

Invitees
- UN Staff and Permanent Missions
- NGO representatives
- General Public