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Responsibility to Protect: Ban urges action to make UN-backed tool ‘a living reality’



Egyptian peacekeepers with UNAMID on patrol in Um Kadada, North Darfur. UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

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The principle of ‘responsibility to protect’ was tested as never before in 2011, resulting in tens of thousands of lives saved and vital lessons learned, [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon said today, calling for action to ensure that this tool is a “living reality” for the world’s people.

“In 2011, history took a turn for the better. The Responsibility to Protect came of age; the principle was tested as never before,” Mr. Ban said in an [address](#) to the Stanley Foundation Conference on the Responsibility to Protect.

“The results were uneven but, at the end of the day, tens of thousands of lives were saved,” he stated.

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“We gave hope to people long oppressed. In Libya, Côte d’Ivoire, South Sudan, Yemen and Syria, by our words and actions, we demonstrated that human protection is a defining purpose of the United Nations in the twenty-first century.

“We also learned important lessons,” he added. “For one, we have learned that this Organization cannot stand on the sidelines when challenged to take preventive action. Where there is a ‘clear and present danger,’ we may need to define the field – cautiously but proactively.”

Agreed at a summit of world leaders in 2005 and sometimes known as ‘R2P’, the principle of the responsibility to protect holds States responsible for shielding their own populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and related crimes against humanity and requires the international community to step in if this obligation is not met.

The Secretary-General said that lessons were also learned about the UN’s own limitations, as in the case of the recent violence in South Sudan.

“We saw it coming weeks before,” he stated. “Yet we were not able to stop it. Nor was the government, which like others has primary responsibility for protecting its citizens.

“The reason was painfully simple: we were denied the use of necessary resources – in particular helicopters that would have given us mobility and reach in a vast region without roads. At the critical moment, I was reduced to begging for replacements from neighbouring countries and missions.

“So, a key challenge in putting the Responsibility to Protect into practice is this: how do we do our job... how do we deliver on Security Council mandates... when the very members of the Council do not give us the support we need?”

Mr. Ban also stressed the importance of prevention – proactive, decisive and early action to stop violence before it begins – and called for making 2012 the Year of Prevention.

He pledged that during his second term as Secretary-General, which began earlier this month, that the UN will redouble its efforts at training, education and capacity-building on human rights, humanitarian law and democratic values and practices. It will also undertake development and peacebuilding in ways that reduce tensions among groups and strengthen institutional barriers to sectarian violence.

Mr. Ban noted that the “next test of our common humanity” is Syria, where more than 5,000 people have lost their lives since a popular uprising began in March last year. The Secretary-General has repeatedly called on President Bashar Al-Assad to stop killing his own people.

“Even as I make these calls, however, I am mindful of the complexities,” said Mr. Ban. “At a time when unity is required, the Security Council is divided. Efforts by regional friends and organizations such as the Arab League are very welcome, but so far they have not borne fruit.

“I am also acutely aware of the need to preserve my own diplomatic space for the crucial moment when the UN’s good offices may be needed.

“Such is the nature of the Responsibility to Protect. It can be a minefield of nuance, political calculation and competing national interests. The result too often is hesitation or inaction. This we can not afford.”

He said that, in a short period of time, the world has embraced the Responsibility to Protect – not because it is easy, but because it is right.

“We therefore have a moral responsibility to push ahead,” he stated. “Together, let us work... with optimism and determination... to make the Responsibility to Protect a living reality for the peoples of the world.”

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