

Timely and decisive response vital to uphold ‘responsibility to protect’ – UN officials



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addresses informal Dialogue of the General Assembly on the Report of the on the Responsibility to Protect. UN Photo/JC McIlwaine

5 September 2012 – A timely and decisive response is vital in the face of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, top United Nations officials stressed today, highlighting the need to act when a State fails to protect its own people.

“This is the ultimate test of the responsibility to protect,” [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon said in his [remarks](#) to an informal interactive

dialogue of the General Assembly on the principle agreed at a summit of world leaders in 2005.

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.

Presenting his latest report on the responsibility to protect, Mr. Ban noted that the concept arose out of the brutal legacy of the 20th century, including the Holocaust, the killing fields of Cambodia, the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and other large-scale tragedies that underlined the failure of individual States to live up to their protection responsibilities.

“The responsibility to protect is a concept whose time has come. For too many millions of victims, it should have come much earlier,” he said.

Today’s dialogue is the fourth held since 2009 and focuses on timely and decisive response – the third pillar of the responsibility to protect.

“We all agree that sovereignty must not be a shield behind which States commit grave crimes against their people. But achieving prevention and protection can be difficult,” said Mr. Ban. “In recent years, we have shown how good offices, preventive diplomacy, mediation, commissions of inquiry and other peaceful means can help pull countries back from the brink of mass violence 

“However, when non-coercive measures fail or are considered inadequate, enforcement under Chapter VII will need to be considered by the appropriate intergovernmental bodies,” he added. “This includes carefully crafted sanctions and, in extreme circumstances, the use of force.”

Chapter VII of the UN Charter allows the Security Council to use force in the face of a threat to peace or aggression, taking “such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international

peace and security,” including blockades and other operations by the forces of Member States.

The Secretary-General pointed to the immense human cost of failing to protect the population of Syria, where more than 18,000 people, mostly civilians, have died since the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad began 18 months ago. He commended the General Assembly for its proactive response to the Syrian crisis. “It has shown that, while moments of unity in the Security Council have been few and far between, the rest of the world body need not be silent,” Mr. Ban said.

The UN chief added that the Council’s paralysis does the Syrian people harm, damages its own credibility and weakens a concept that was adopted with such hope and expectations.

“Let us by all means continue to talk through the responsibility to protect in all its aspects. Each year we achieve greater precision and common understanding,” he stated. “But let us recognize that we face an urgent test here and now. Words must become deeds. Promise must become practice.”

Addressing the gathering, the General Assembly’s President, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, noted that, through implementation of the responsibility to protect, the role of the UN is not to supplant or replace the State in meeting its legal obligation to protect.

“The responsibility to protect is rather intended, as a modality for assisting a government that is unable to deliver on its protection obligations. The international community can only act in the event that a State ‘manifestly fails’ to protect its citizens,” he said. “So the international response is intended to reinforce, not undermine, national sovereignty. This should help governments to ensure full protection to populations.”

Among the other participants in today’s day-long dialogue are the newly appointed Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of

Genocide, Adama Dieng; Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson; and the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ivan Simonovic.

In his remarks to the meeting, the recently-appointed Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, pointed out that the range of tools available under the third pillar of the responsibility to protect is extensive.

“It is our collective responsibility to study the implications of the use of each of them, and to understand the conditions under which the potential of each tool can be maximized,” Mr. Dieng said. “It is also our responsibility to establish and strengthen the structures that will make third-pillar tools actionable and effective.”

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