

2019 UN General Assembly Debate on the Responsibility to Protect and the Prevention of Genocide, War Crimes, Ethnic Cleansing and Crimes Against Humanity

Today, 27 June, the UN General Assembly held a plenary meeting on “The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” as part of the formal agenda of its 73rd session. This was the second consecutive formal debate on R2P and it presented an important opportunity for the UN membership to take stock of efforts to prevent or halt mass atrocity crimes since 2005. During today’s meeting, 54 UN member states and the European Union spoke on behalf of 94 countries. The plenary meeting will resume tomorrow, 28 June.

Today’s debate takes place amidst a historic weakening of the laws and norms that bind and safeguard humanity and at a time when a record 70.8 million people around the world have been displaced by persecution, conflict and mass atrocities. As noted in this year’s annual report of the UN Secretary-General on R2P, *Lessons Learned for Prevention*, “there is a widening gap between the 2005 World Summit commitment to the responsibility to protect and the daily experience of vulnerable populations.” In far too many situations in the world today, populations are experiencing indiscriminate attacks on schools and medical facilities, widespread rape and sexual violence perpetrated as a weapon of war, disproportionate and deadly force being used against peaceful protesters, and institutionalized persecution of minority groups.

Nevertheless, R2P remains the most effective principle around which the international community can coalesce when vulnerable populations face the threat of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Utilizing R2P as a mobilizing principle, the international community has helped save lives in Côte d’Ivoire, Central African Republic and elsewhere. R2P has also helped mobilize support for international accountability, as witnessed by last month’s announcement by The Gambia of their intention to take the case of the Rohingya to the International Court of Justice, citing the government of Myanmar’s breach of the Genocide Convention.

R2P is a promise to those people for whom these crimes are not abstract words, but real acts that pose an existential threat to them, their loved ones and their communities. We hope that member states who recommitted to R2P during today’s debate uphold their promise to vulnerable populations and help enable the international community to take effective preventive action wherever and whenever mass atrocity crimes are threatened.