A Responsibility to Protect: The World's View

With Andrew Stroehlein, openDemocracy.net, 5 April 2007

The "responsibility to protect" peoples in distress has the support of global public opinion, finds new research. What does that mean for crisis-areas such as Darfur? Gareth Evans & Andrew Stroehlein of the International Crisis Group report.

Trying to draw sustained international media attention to violent conflicts and mass atrocities around the world is a depressing business. The subject-matter is deeply disturbing, attention-spans are limited, and it is often hard to tell if publics are taking any notice in a way that is likely, in turn, to make their governments more responsive.

On Darfur, for example, non-governmental organisations such as the International Crisis Group have been ringing alarm-bells for over three years, yet effective international action to stop the state-sponsored violence has not materialised.

But new evidence suggests the message is getting across, at least on one level. A major new twelve-country opinion poll released on 5 April 2007 by WorldPublicOpinion.org and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reveals some encouraging results regarding attitudes toward mass atrocities in general, and the Darfur tragedy in particular.

On the broader question of whether the United Nations Security Council has the "responsibility to authorise the use of military force to prevent severe human rights violations such as genocide, even against the will of their own government", strong majorities in many countries replied favourably. 74% of Americans agreed, along with 69% of Palestinians, 66% of Armenians, 64% of Israelis, 54% of French and Poles and 51% of Indians. And all populations polled were more in favour than opposed.

Perhaps the most surprising result emerged from China. Though its government has long been considered a staunch defender of state sovereignty under just about all circumstances, a full 76% of Chinese citizens agreed the Security Council had a responsibility to intervene when such mass crimes were taking place.

This is a heartening result. People around the world do feel a fundamental obligation to halt mass atrocities wherever they occur, by whatever means necessary. In short, the "responsibility to protect" doctrine (or "R2P" as it is coming to be abbreviated), has gained real street-credibility, notwithstanding the rearguard action being mounted against it by a number of states who hate the idea of any constraints on their sovereign power.

The R2P principle was unanimously adopted by heads of state and government at the UN's world summit in September 2005 Its core is as follows: while sovereign states retain the primary responsibility to protect their own people from mass violence and atrocity crimes, when a state fails to meet that responsibility (either through incapacity or ill-will), then it shifts to the international community - and the international community can exercise this responsibility by a graduated series of measures which could ultimately include, if it is absolutely necessary, military force.

What can be done?

The application ofthe R2P principle to particular cases like Darfur requires balanced judgment as to what measures will be effective, and what may be counterproductive. The international poll results suggest that when people are reasonably well informed about specific situations they show intuitively sensible practical judgment. Quite a few respondents (especially in countries like Thailand, Ukraine and Armenia) had no opinion on Darfur, perhaps the result of low attention to it by their national media. But those who did have an opinion got it, in our view, just about right.

In all countries there were strong majorities favouring the Security Council's "right" to authorise military intervention in Darfur, but fewer believed that it had a "responsibility" to so act here and now. When the issue was further narrowed and respondents were asked whether their own country should send troops as part of an international peacekeeping force "to stop the killing in Darfur", support dropped, with only France and the United States tallying more voices for than against.

Most analysts currently believe that, despite the obvious appeal of a full-scale non-consensual ground invasion of Sudan aimed at protecting the people of Darfur once and for all, this would very likely do more harm than good. It would probably make it impossible to maintain existing humanitarian lifelines to millions of people dependent on aid, and throw into disarray the very fragile Sudanese north-south peace now only just holding together. The current focus is on tough economic sanctions, specifically targeted where they would hurt the Khartoum regime's interests most and thus pressure it into doing two things: accepting an effective international civilian protection force and making serious efforts to achieve a comprehensive and sustainable peace settlement with the rebels.

It is intriguing that, on the evidence of this poll, the many people around the world who feel well enough informed about Darfur to have an opinion, do seem to understand that there are many less extreme measures that have not yet been applied but now certainly should be. By and large, people are troubled by major human-rights violations, know what is going on, accept the R2P principle, and - while cautious about applying military force - want appropriate action. It's about time their governments delivered it.

Gareth Evans is president of the International Crisis Group. He was co-chair of the international commission on intervention and state sovereignty (ICISS), appointed by the Canadian government, which published its report, The Responsibility to Protect, in December 2001. Andrew Stroehlein is Crisis Group's Media Director.