

Taking the responsibility to protect

The New York Times

What is to be done when a government is unwilling or unable to stop mass atrocities being committed within its borders? That question has been asked far too many times in Africa - from Rwanda to Eastern Congo, from Somalia to Darfur.

The horrors of conflict in Africa continue today, but there is also a sign of how rapid response, with support from neighbors and the international community, can save lives and bring hope. In contrast to the crises in Rwanda in 1994 and Darfur in 2003, we see today in Kenya the formation of an international consensus that it is unacceptable to ignore violence of the kind that has occurred in recent months or to consider the crisis as purely an internal matter of the state.

What has brought about this change in attitude? We can't underestimate the importance of the leadership and people of Kenya committing themselves to finding a just and equitable way forward. But it should also be acknowledged that the international community has moved far faster in addressing this conflict than it has in similar situations elsewhere. The United Nations has engaged at the highest political levels, the Security Council has issued a statement deploring the violence, and the secretary general and the leadership of human rights offices have been mobilized. African leaders have provided invaluable mediation. This now centers on the work being done by Kofi Annan, Graça Machel and Benjamin M'Kapa, at the request of the African Union.

I believe what we are seeing in Kenya is action on a fundamental principle - the Responsibility to Protect. At the UN World Summit in September 2005, government leaders pledged that states must protect their populations from mass atrocities and, if they fail, the international community must take action.

Unfortunately, the Responsibility to Protect is frequently misunderstood. It is not a justification of military intervention. It simply requires states to protect their own people and help other states to build the capacity to do the same. It means that international organizations like the UN have a responsibility to warn, to generate effective preventive strategies, and when necessary, to mobilize effective responses. The crisis in Kenya illustrates this: The primary role for outside actors is to protect civilians - not least by helping governments to improve security and protect human rights.

Nevertheless, despite some encouraging signs, little progress has been made towards implementing R2P, as it is often called, at the UN or at the national level. One response that I particularly welcome took place in November when women leaders from around the world convened a summit on global security and pledged to promote international support for the Responsibility to Protect and ensure that women's views and involvement are included in peace and

security initiatives. Think how different the situations in the Eastern Congo or Darfur could be if women were fully involved in seeking solutions.

More must be done to bring R2P to life. Last week in New York, a Global Center on the Responsibility to Protect was launched. Its aims are to build greater acceptance of the R2P norm and to work with others to call attention to how it must be applied in real-world crises. The Elders, the group of leaders brought together last year by Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel, have declared February as responsibility to Protect month as part of our Every Human Has Rights campaign to mark the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Universal Declaration was adopted in the aftermath of World War II, the Holocaust and the use of nuclear weapons. World opinion came together then to say, "never again." Yet in the past six decades, we have witnessed mass atrocities committed against others across the globe. We all share a responsibility to do whatever we can to help prevent and protect one another from such violence.

The place to start is with prevention: through measures aimed in particular at building state capacity, remedying grievances, and ensuring the rule of law. My hope is that in the future, the Responsibility to Protect will be exercised not after the murder and rape of innocent people, but when community tensions and political unrest begin. It is by preventing, rather than reacting, that we can truly fulfill our shared responsibility to end the worst forms of human rights abuses.

Desmond Tutu is Anglican archbishop emeritus of Cape Town and chairman of The Elders.