

25 June 2018

Secretary-General's remarks to the General Assembly debate on the responsibility to protect [as delivered]

I welcome this formal debate of the General Assembly on the responsibility to protect. The first as it was said, since 2009.

Such discussion is more critical today than ever as we strive together to protect people from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

Global leaders unanimously endorsed the responsibility to protect at the 2005 World Summit. Following genocides, a decade before in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and coming at a time of profound global divisions, this was a breakthrough. The imperative was clear: do more to protect people, and do so as a united international community.

Yet today there is still fear that the principle could be used to take collective action for purposes other than those agreed in the World Summit Outcome.

There are also concerns about possible double standards and the selective use of the principle in the past.

That is why open and frank exchanges such as this are necessary to dispel misconceptions and mistrust. We have to forge mutual understanding and establish stronger support for the responsibility to protect as a key tool of protection and prevention.

Let us remember that the primary responsibility for protecting people rests with States.

As the World Summit Outcome document says, and I quote, “Each

individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations ... This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including their incitement ... We accept that responsibility and will act in accordance with it”.

Indeed, protecting its people is a fundamental part of the exercise of the national sovereignty of a State.

In that spirit, my latest report on the responsibility to protect proposes various steps that States can take to strengthen their capacities, including conducting national risk assessments and designing policies to address any vulnerabilities.

Expanding the participation of civil society is also critical in enhancing early warning and in ensuring the effectiveness of national human rights institutions and ombudspersons.

I also encourage Member States to ratify and domesticate instruments of international law that relate to the prohibition and prevention of the crimes and violations referred to in the Summit Outcome.

As of today, 45 Member States have still not ratified the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. In a year when we mark the Convention’s 70th anniversary, achieving universal ratification would send a welcome signal of resolve.

Let us also recall that the international community has a responsibility to support States in fulfilling this task.

Again, let us listen to the words of the World Summit Outcome: “The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the Charter, to help to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.”

Regional organizations have a role to play in helping Governments to address the risks and precursors of atrocity crimes.

Networks of States can also be valuable in developing partnerships, mechanisms and good practices. In the past month, approximately one-third

of the Members of this Assembly met twice to advance such efforts: first in Kampala, together with civil society organizations, under the umbrella of the Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes; and again in Helsinki, for the annual meeting of Global Focal Points on the Responsibility to Protect.

The United Nations will continue to support Member States, especially those that might be facing fragility and stress, in strengthening institutions, defending human rights and fortifying the cohesion of society. This is an essential part of my prevention agenda. The Office of my Special Advisers on Genocide Prevention and on the Responsibility to Protect provides vital support in this regard.

Only when peaceful means are inadequate, and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations, may there be a responsibility for collective action.

Here, too, let us be clear: The responsibility to protect does not create a new mechanism for intervention or coercion.

The Outcome Document stipulates that any such action is to be carried out “through the Security Council, in accordance with the Charter, including Chapter VII, on a case-by-case basis”.

It is clear that today’s discussion takes place against a backdrop of atrocity crimes being committed at a scale and ferocity not seen in years, with little regard for international human rights and humanitarian law.

We are witnessing deliberate attacks against civilian and non-military infrastructures, such as hospitals and schools, leading to large-scale civilian casualties.

We are seeing rampant sexual violence; the denial of life-saving aid; and widespread and systematic targeting of specific ethnic groups, that could amount to acts of genocide.

None of these crimes is “inevitable” or a by-product of conflict. All atrocity crimes are preventable and can never be justified. This was the reason for my official letter to the Security Council last August on the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

It is important to build the consensus needed to mount desperately needed responses to ease suffering and to end violence.

Our over-arching challenge is to uphold the principle while preventing its mis-use. That means acting promptly, preventively, diplomatically, before situations escalate and spiral out of control.

A positive example was set by the international community when it decided to act in the Central African Republic when there was a high risk of a genocidal killing spree.

An International Commission of Inquiry established by the Security Council later concluded that timely action by the African Union, the UN peacekeeping operation and French peacekeeping forces amid ongoing fighting prevented an even greater explosion of violence.

The World Summit Outcome stresses the need for the General Assembly to continue consideration of the responsibility to protect. And I strongly encourage you to do so.

We need to support the efforts of inter-governmental bodies to prevent atrocity crimes, including by making better use of the tools at the disposal of the Security Council such as accountability mechanisms.

At this time of extreme challenges, we must not abandon the responsibility to protect or leave it in a state of suspended animation, finely articulated in words but breached time and again in practice.

Lofty principles mean little if they cannot be applied when they matter most.

The credibility of the international community, and above all the lives of millions, rest on us.

Thank you.