

8th Annual Ministerial Roundtable on R2P: *R2P at 10: Linking Crosscutting Agendas for Prevention and Protection*

Coinciding with the opening of the 70th United Nations General Assembly, the governments of the Netherlands, Botswana and Liberia, in association with the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, co-hosted the 8th annual Ministerial Roundtable on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) at the UN Secretariat on 30 September 2015.

The aim of this year's R2P Ministerial Roundtable was to focus on the core issues of civilian protection and mass atrocity prevention that lie at the heart of R2P. A range of other related policy agendas were also discussed, including Early Warning, Mediation, Peacekeeping, Protection of Civilians, Children and Armed Conflict, Women, Peace and Security, Countering Violent Extremism, Transitional Justice and Accountability for mass atrocities

The meeting opened with statements from the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Mr. Adama Dieng, on behalf of the Secretary-General, and the President of the General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Mogens Lykketoft. A cross-regional group of ministers representing nine governments joined the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, H.E. Mr. Bert Koenders, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Botswana, H.E. Ms. Pelonomi Venson-Moitoi and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Liberia, H.E. Mr. Augustine Kpehe Ngafuan in contributing to the discussion, which was moderated by Ms. Lyse Doucet, Chief International Correspondent of the BBC. More than twenty-five other governments also attended as observers.

KEY THEMES

Engaging crosscutting agendas

During this year's meeting, each minister spoke on the relationship between upholding the Responsibility to Protect and a related policy agenda. The discussion emphasized that discussions of R2P have moved from understanding to implementation, highlighting the ways in which Early Warning, Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding, and Accountability are essential tools of atrocity prevention. Participants also addressed how actions taken to implement a variety of policy agendas - including Children and Armed Conflict and Women, Peace and Security – are mutually reinforcing with R2P. Ministers discussed, for example, how committing further resources to training state forces and peacekeepers in preventing violence against women and children reinforces commitments to atrocity prevention, protection of civilians, peacekeeping reform, and broader human rights protection.

An important step in reinforcing these cross-cutting agendas is to ensure that the entire political system – within the UN as well as in states themselves and regional organizations – has the knowledge and tools necessary to identify risks and prevent mass atrocities. At the international level, this includes implementing the UN's Human Rights Up Front initiative, which encourages operational reform throughout the UN to ensure that the prevention of serious violations of human rights are a system-wide responsibility.

All-of-government approaches are also necessary at the national level in order to reinforce mechanisms for mass atrocity prevention. Some participants highlighted the need to ensure that atrocity prevention is taken into account when implementing the new Sustainable Development Goals, especially goal sixteen, which is wholly in keeping with the institutional resilience that Pillars I and II of R2P seek to develop. While discussing peacebuilding mechanisms, the minister from Liberia emphasized the broad range of government institutions that need rebuilding following a conflict in order to prevent a recurrence of atrocities. Such action increases state capacity to prevent and respond, and also strengthens the trust that civilians have in their government.

Addressing the gaps between early warning and early action

The President of the General Assembly remarked that, “historically, our greatest failure in the UN since 1945 has been our reluctance to act to protect civilians from mass atrocities.” Improving our collective ability to respond to mass atrocities involves generating greater structural capacity and reinforcing political will.

Through their discussions of ongoing commitments to R2P and other crosscutting agendas, Ministers addressed the question of whether consensus on R2P is universal. Given the rapid development of the norm since 2005, why do populations in Syria, Central African Republic, Yemen and other countries remain at risk? While some acknowledged ongoing political divisions, particularly within the Security Council, and the shifting priorities of those with the capacity to fund various peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities, several participants also noted the growing challenge created by violent non-state actors and the capacity of states and the international community to take action against them. Additionally, as one participant noted, good mechanisms of prevention take time to develop – and while ten years of R2P may seem like a long time, it may not yet be long enough to rebuild and repair the damage done by so many years of inadequate attention to prevention and protection.

Among the suggestions provided for sparking early action were emphasizing upstream preventive action, active engagement and information sharing among the members of the Global Network of R2P Focal Points, providing financial and logistical support towards the implementation of the Human Rights Up Front initiatives, and ensuring accountability where crimes are committed. Member states also suggested reinforcing existing political commitment through a General Assembly Resolution on R2P.

The UN Security Council's role in mass atrocity prevention and response

Many participants noted the unique role of the UN Security Council in implementing R2P, reducing gaps in timely response, and developing responses under related international policy agendas. From authorizing peacekeeping and peacebuilding mandates to ensuring accountability for grave crimes through referrals to the ICC or approval of transitional justice mechanisms, the Security Council has a vital role to play in the prevention of mass atrocity crimes and the protection of civilians.

Participants discussed UN Peacekeeping and the Security Council's need to balance an adequate response to threats to civilians with realistic understanding of the resources available to missions when developing mandates. Minister Koenders noted that “protection of civilians has to be at the heart of mandates; it has to be part of a whole agenda that deals with preventing conflict, promoting human rights and ensuring accountability.” But the minister also cautioned that resourcing of peacekeeping missions often remains inadequate to fulfill the mandates given to them by the Security Council. Participants also discussed the means through which the Security Council could be more proactive, including through putting countries where emerging risks are evident on their agenda earlier.

Several participants noted with concern the dire effects of the permanent members of the Security Council using their veto in mass atrocity situations. In this context, states discussed the initiatives launched by France and Mexico as well as the ACT group, encouraging the permanent members to take steps to ensure resolutions are not vetoed in cases involving the perpetration of mass atrocities. Special Adviser Dieng noted that, “it is unacceptable that the Security Council failed to take action by vetoing a decision that is aimed to protect populations from atrocity crimes,” while some member states encouraged the development of creative solutions in order to avoid being “held hostage by the UN Security Council.”

CONCLUSION

The eighth annual Ministerial Roundtable marked the tenth anniversary of the adoption of R2P at the 2005 World Summit. The anniversary provided an important opportunity to take stock of national, regional and global efforts to prevent mass atrocity crimes and set out a vision for the decade ahead. Many participants noted that while observing the tenth anniversary, member states should pass another General Assembly Resolution on R2P in order to reinforce the existing political commitment. The ministers concluded the meeting by acknowledging that initiatives such as the UN's Human Rights Up Front action plan will strengthen our collective resilience to mass atrocities, but ultimately, through partnerships and supporting crosscutting agendas, we can strengthen the capacity to prevent atrocities and protect civilians from the most grave violations of human rights.