

Mr. Mayr-Harting (Austria): First of all, I would like to thank the Secretary-General for the presentation of his report on the implementation of the responsibility to protect (A/63/677) to the General Assembly on Tuesday. I would like to recall the Secretary-General's words to the effect that this debate is first and foremost about the character of the United Nations and the future of humankind. Let me also thank the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General, Mr. Edward Luck, for all his work in this context. We fully align ourselves with the statement delivered by the representative of Sweden on behalf of the European Union.

The main aim of the responsibility to protect (R2P) is to protect civilian populations from genocide and other mass atrocities, based on the clear understanding that the sovereignty of States implies important responsibilities. Austria was and is a strong advocate for the inclusion of R2P into the World Summit Outcome (resolution 60/1) by world leaders in 2005. Based on a broad consensus, this decision sent an important and universal message on the need to protect the populations of the world from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, as well as from the incitement to such crimes. This call was an unprecedented step towards ensuring that the atrocities of the past will not be repeated.

Let me underline that the primary responsibility for the implementation of R2P rests with each and every individual State. The international community's role in assisting States to live up to their responsibility is of a supplementary nature. The need to take appropriate collective measures in full accordance with the Charter of the United Nations arises only in cases of manifest failure of a State to protect its population from the perpetration of core international crimes.

Austria welcomes the Secretary-General's report. It provides a clear framework for the implementation of the responsibility to protect, as defined in the Outcome Document, and an excellent basis for further discussion. The report makes clear that the three pillars of the report — the protection responsibilities of the State, international assistance and capacity-building, and timely and decisive response — are all based on existing international law and in particular on the Charter of the United Nations. They are of equal importance, and at the same time there is no automatism and no necessary sequencing between one and the other.

Today, I would like to focus on the key task of ensuring that States and the international community live up to their obligations under the responsibility to protect. When it comes to putting the concept of R2P into practice, Austria believes that particular attention must be given to preventing situations from escalating, through early warning and capacity-building.

We welcome the reference in the Secretary-General's report to the role of the rule of law, which constitutes a long-standing focus of Austria's work in the United Nations. I quote from the report:

"The rule of law is fundamental to preventing the perpetration of crimes relating to the responsibility to protect. The United Nations system, including through the engagement of donor countries, should increase the rule of law assistance it offers to Member States. The goals should be to ensure equal access to justice and to improve judicial, prosecutorial, penal and law enforcement services for all. Such steps would make it more likely that disputes within society could be resolved through legal, rather than violent, means" (A/63/677, para. 47).

The rule of law is of specific importance with regard to the stabilization of post-conflict societies in order to prevent the re-emergence of conflicts and to build a sustainable peace. Furthermore, it is an essential element in the fight against impunity and to re-establish the trust of the population in its institutions. Thus, it is important to address R2P from a rule-of-law perspective as a cross-cutting issue for each of the three pillars.

It is crucial that the United Nations, through the Rule of Law Coordination and Resource Group and the Rule of Law Unit, further intensify its efforts to strengthen coordination and cooperation among the numerous United Nations rule of law actors, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations Development Programme. The Group of Friends of the Rule of Law, of which Austria is honoured to serve as coordinator, will be happy to assist the United Nations in such efforts.

From 14 to 16 June this year, Austria, jointly with the International Peace Institute, organized a seminar in Vienna under the theme “The role of the Security Council and the responsibility to protect: policy, process and practice”. Experts and practitioners from various regions and organizations explored the role and the contribution’s of the Security Council in preventing the four crimes covered by the concept of R2P and in improving the situation of populations affected by armed conflict. At the same time, Austria fully agrees that the General Assembly, as the forum for seeking common ground, should continue to have a key role in the ongoing process of operationalizing the concept.

Regarding next steps, Austria fully endorses the proposal of the European Union that the Secretary-General continue to keep the General Assembly informed about the implementation of R2P. We must ensure, through continuous commitment, that we all take our responsibilities seriously. The key challenge is for States and the international community to live up to their obligations under R2P. The Secretary-General’s report sets out the tools available to the international community to assist States in that regard.

Building upon the broad consensus achieved in 2005, we stand ready to work for a future in which full compliance with the responsibility to protect also reflects the reality on the ground. R2P is a Charter-based concept that deserves to be operationalized and implemented. Our focus in this endeavour must be on saving lives through timely and decisive action taken at the national, regional and international levels.