

# Summary of the 2023 UN General Assembly Plenary Meeting on the Responsibility to Protect

The UN General Assembly held a plenary meeting on the “Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” on 26 and 30 June as part of the formal agenda of its 77th session. The debate constituted the sixth time that the General Assembly formally considered R2P. During the meeting, 54 UN member states, one observer mission and the European Union (EU) spoke on behalf of 102 countries and two observer missions.

As states gathered in the General Assembly to discuss challenges and best practices for the implementation of R2P, this year’s debate took place amidst the backdrop of alarming global levels of violence, persecution and conflict, including the outbreak of new conflicts in countries like Sudan with a recent history of atrocities. Despite national and global efforts to protect populations and confront the risk factors for conflict and atrocities, violations and abuses of international law continue and an unprecedented number of people are currently displaced globally by persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations.

## BACKGROUND TO THE DEBATE

The UN General Assembly has held eight informal interactive dialogues on R2P (2010-2017) and six debates (2009, 2018-2019 and 2021-2023). No debate or informal dialogue was held in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the first debate in 2009, 138 states and six regional organizations or groupings have spoken in a debate or dialogue on R2P on behalf of 179 states.

Since 2009 the UN Secretary-General has released 15 reports on R2P. This year’s report, “Development and the Responsibility to Protect: Recognizing and Addressing

Embedded Risks and Drivers of Atrocity Crimes,” considers the intersection between mass atrocity crimes and development. In doing so, the Secretary-General recognizes the ways in which developmental deficits and consequent insecurity exacerbate the risk of atrocity crimes, as well as how states can leverage sustainable development to build conditions for peace and resilience to atrocity crimes.

## PARTICIPATION OVERVIEW

H.E. Csaba Kőrösi, President of the 77th session of the General Assembly, opened the debate. George Okoth-Obbo, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, delivered introductory remarks, underlining that “underdevelopment, poverty and societal inequalities, food insecurity, stressors on social resilience, governance, institutional and accountability failures, discrimination, violations and abuses of human rights and conflict can be rooted signal risk factors, drivers and multipliers of atrocity crimes.” He further highlighted how, conversely, “development can build the conditions for sustainable peace, equitable growth and accountable governance and thereby cement the prospects for realizing the fundamental purposes and objectives of the Responsibility to Protect.” Reflecting upon the Secretary-General’s report on R2P and its recommendations, Special Adviser Okoth-Obbo emphasized that the international community should “leverage development policies, strategies and programmes across the spectrum of atrocity risk assessment, early warning, preparedness and response to avoid, reduce or mitigate these risks and occurrences.”

The opening remarks were followed by interventions from Croatia, on behalf of the Group of Friends of R2P; the EU, on behalf of its member states and Albania,

Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, San Marino and Ukraine; Latvia, on behalf of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden; France, on behalf of Mexico; Venezuela on behalf of the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations, and 53 additional member states and one observer mission, the Sovereign Order of Malta.

Participation in the 2023 Debate <sup>1</sup>	
Africa Group	Algeria*, Angola*, Botswana*, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea*, Eritrea*, Gambia, Ghana*, Liberia*, Mali*, Morocco*, Mozambique*, Namibia, Nigeria*, Rwanda, Senegal*, Sierra Leone*, South Africa, South Sudan*, Tanzania*, Zimbabwe*
Asia-Pacific Group	Bangladesh*, Cambodia*, China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Iran, Japan*, Jordan, Laos*, Marshall Islands*, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Syria
Eastern Europe Group	Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus*, Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia*, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania*, Moldova*, Montenegro*, North Macedonia*, Poland, Romania*, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine
Latin American and Caribbean Group	Argentina, Bolivia*, Brazil, Chile*, Costa Rica, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico*, Nicaragua, Panama*, Peru*, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines*, Uruguay, Venezuela
Western Europe and Others Group	Andorra*, Australia, Austria*, Belgium*, Canada, Denmark*, Finland*, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland*, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg*, Malta, Netherlands*, New Zealand*, Norway*, Portugal*, San Marino*, Spain, Sweden*, Switzerland, Türkiye, United Kingdom, United States
Regional Orgs.	European Union
Observer Missions	Palestine*, Sovereign Order of Malta

<sup>1</sup> Those with an \* did not deliver statements but were represented in a group statement.

The statement by the Group of Friends of R2P highlighted the valuable progress achieved by the UN, member states and other stakeholders, including civil society, in implementing R2P at the national, regional and international levels. The Group underlined that R2P “needs to be at the heart of our shared mission to advance peace and security, human rights and development” and that effective prevention of atrocities can only be achieved if the UN system responds holistically by using all the tools and mechanisms at its disposal, including by greater cross-departmental collaboration. Twenty-seven members of the Group of Friends also made statements in their national capacity.

Djibouti spoke for the first time in an R2P debate or dialogue. Eleven of the states who have participated in all previous General Assembly discussions on R2P made statements: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Iran, Republic of Korea, Switzerland, United Kingdom (UK), United States and Venezuela.

## KEY THEMES

The overwhelming majority of participating member states expressed their commitment to paragraphs 138 and 139 of the UN World Summit Outcome Document. Participants expressed grave concern about the unprecedented number of forcibly displaced people, and underscored the importance of strengthening domestic, regional and international efforts to prevent atrocity crimes and protect vulnerable populations amidst disregard for international law. Participants also noted the importance of ensuring that affected populations, including women and girls, are involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of civilian protection and atrocity prevention strategies and activities.

Many states emphasized that translating early warning into early action remains a challenge, and highlighted ongoing crises in Myanmar (Burma), Ethiopia, Syria, Sudan (Darfur), Ukraine and elsewhere.

While the discussion broadly reflected widespread support for R2P, the Group of Friends of the Charter of the United Nations, representing 19 states and one observer mission, as well as some of the Group's members – China, Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Iran, Nicaragua, Russia, Syria and Venezuela –

challenged the application of the norm. The Group stated that “in line with the provisions of our domestic legislations, as well as with our relevant international obligations, we express our categorical rejection of the commission of crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and genocide, while emphasizing the central role of States as guarantors of the safety, security and wellbeing of their respective populations.” In expressing concern about the unequal implementation of R2P, the Group underlined that “instead of pushing for controversial and divisive approaches that have the potential of further increasing tensions and mistrust around the globe, the international community should make greater use of the tools provided by multilateralism and diplomacy for the peaceful settlement of disputes.”

The following sections assess the predominant topics highlighted during the discussion.

### *Annual Report of the UN Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect*

Forty-eight speakers (on behalf of 88 countries) discussed the topic of this year’s Secretary-General’s report on R2P. Member states acknowledged that poverty, long-standing institutionalized discrimination, poor education, economic and gender inequalities and social exclusion, as well as lack of good governance and corruption, are all important risk factors of atrocity crimes. Member states also stressed that violence and atrocities often cause profound political, economic and social damage, which is sometimes referred to as “development in reverse.”

The Gambia concretely reflected upon the relationship between atrocities and development in their own region, stating that in Africa, “apart from the heavy human and material costs, conflicts and atrocities impede production and development, damage infrastructure, prevent the reliable delivery of social services and disrupt the growth of societies. Conflicts on the continent have perpetuated poverty, negatively impacting progress toward our collective goal of achieving sustainable peace and security.”

The Secretary-General’s report notes that addressing global challenges and building more resilient societies are critical to the prevention of mass atrocity crimes. Development can aid in fulfilling these needs by creating the conditions for sustainable peace, equitable growth and accountable governance. In this context, Djibouti urged the international community to “leverage development programming across the spectrum of

atrocity risk assessment, early warning, preparedness, and the response to avoid, reduce or mitigate these risks and occurrences.” In calling for a strengthening of the R2P-development nexus, the Republic of Korea stated that, “it is absolutely crucial to prevent the conditions for atrocities from being exacerbated by duly considering the risks and drivers of atrocities in the sustainable development programmes.”

### *Preventing atrocities through implementation of the SDGs*

Due to the theme of this year’s report, the importance of applying an atrocity prevention lens to the development programs, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was emphasized by several states, including France and Mexico who noted that, “Addressing the root causes [of atrocity crimes] entails a prevention approach based on the complementary and mutually reinforcing nature of human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals.” Many states also raised the special importance of SDG 16 on peace justice and strong institutions. The UK stressed that “countering socio-economic inequality and promoting the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG16 with its focus on building strong institutions, are actions which can also play an important part in tackling the causes of atrocities.”

Seventy-eight states and the EU emphasized the important role of achieving the SDGs and Agenda 2030 for the prevention of atrocities and upholding R2P. The Group of Friends of R2P noted that “the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a framework for global cooperation to achieve a better and more sustainable future – and can significantly contribute to atrocity prevention efforts.” In addition, Hungary emphasized that “if more efforts are directed towards the implementation of Agenda 2030, that can significantly contribute to atrocity prevention efforts.”

Several states also acknowledged the importance of discussing atrocity prevention and R2P in the context of social and economic affairs, as well as peacebuilding. Bulgaria mentioned that “In an effort to energize the UN System around peace and development the Economic and Social Council held in January this year a special meeting to consider the potential of social and economic measures to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.” It furthermore announced that “A joint meeting of ECOSOC and the Peacebuilding Commission on the importance of SDGs in linking peace and development on the ground” was held on 29 June. In this same context, Hungary emphasized

that the Peacebuilding Commission “can play an important role in supporting states in the transition from conflict and atrocity crimes to sustainable peace by addressing underlying development indicators.” Brazil stressed that “the Peacebuilding Commission is well-positioned to help fill a gap by playing its bridging role between peace and security efforts and development solutions, and also by mobilizing international support in cooperation with the whole UN system.”

Many member states also referenced the unique opportunity the international community has to reshape the future through the UN’s New Agenda for Peace. Namibia stated that “as the UN continues in its endeavors to develop a New Agenda for Peace, it is my delegation’s fervent hope that our efforts will be geared towards strengthening the global peace and security architecture by leveraging the lessons learned and effectively addressing emerging issues.” Seventy-six states and one observer referred to the New Agenda for Peace, including Germany, who noted that “the New Agenda for Peace offers the potential of strengthening prevention, understanding of key risk factors and implementing SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.”

Several states also highlighted the important opportunity member states have during the upcoming SDG summit. “As we are approaching the SDG Summit in September, we are convinced that addressing the root causes of atrocity crimes could contribute significantly to the realization of the 2030 Agenda, as well as to the goals of ‘Our Common Agenda’ and the ‘New Agenda for Peace.’ The need to strengthen the triple nexus approach becomes more relevant than ever in this regard,” according to Greece.

### *Support for the Office of the UN Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect*

Sixty-seven member states expressed support for the Office of the UN Special Advisers on Genocide Prevention and R2P (OSAPG). Reaffirming their support for the Office’s contributions to early warning and prevention, the Group of Friends of R2P encouraged the two Special Advisers “to use their leadership roles to advance atrocity prevention and highlight risks in ongoing crises around the world,” including by issuing statements on specific country situations, sharing country analyses at various meetings with the wider UN membership, and to “work with all relevant parts of the UN system, to overcome siloes and address atrocity risks holistically.”

Similarly, while many states acknowledged the importance of the thematic nature of the Secretary-General’s annual reports on R2P, 70 countries pushed for the inclusion of risk assessments highlighting specific country situations and recommendations for effective response in future reports. In echoing the need for more concrete guidance from annual reports, Hungary stated that “concrete and practical recommendations or best practices significantly assist Member States in their prevention efforts, and help them to assess whether these recommendations were implemented, as appropriate. In addition, an analysis of trends regarding risks could also facilitate the prevention efforts of Member States.”

Several states also highlighted the challenges the UN Special Adviser on R2P is facing within the UN system, including those in relation to the resources allocated to his mandate. Djibouti, for example, encouraged member states to “explore options to enhance and strengthen the role of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the R2P in providing UN early warning assessments and recommendations on how to prevent atrocities, including to the Security Council, General Assembly and the Human Rights Council.” Latvia underscored the importance of “the Special Adviser on R2P’s regular presence in New York to help advance the implementation of R2P together with both UN member states and the UN secretariat.”

### *Accountability for mass atrocity crimes*

Forty-five states, one observer state and the EU emphasized the need to ensure justice for victims of mass atrocity crimes. Slovenia noted, “We cannot stress enough the importance of a robust system of international law, which provides stability and predictability while ensuring justice and accountability. We remain committed to the fight against impunity and to bringing justice to the victims of atrocities on all levels.” Many states stressed the importance of strengthening national judicial systems and policies, improving judicial cooperation and advancing transitional justice to effectively contribute to the prevention of mass atrocities. “Ensuring accountability for the most serious crimes under international law *today* is a critical component of our responsibility to protect civilians *tomorrow*,” according to Liechtenstein.

States also stressed that international and hybrid courts and tribunals, as well as cases brought under universal jurisdiction, can provide complementary avenues for holding states and individual perpetrators of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity accountable.

## *Improving early warning mechanisms*

The timely identification of risks and early warning indicators of atrocity crimes can help prevent their occurrence. During the debate, 70 member states and the EU emphasized the importance of bolstering early warning mechanisms at the national, regional and international level. Several member states shared best practices on early warning in domestic and regional contexts and described the different tools that have been developed and implemented. The EU discussed their toolkit on R2P and atrocity prevention, which provides practical guidance to EU delegations, missions and operations. “In the EU, with tools and policies such as the EU’s Atrocity Prevention Toolkit, our Early Warning System and Horizon Scanning, and our Conflict Analysis Screenings, we work to enhance our ability to identify and address early warning signs in our external action,” stated the EU.

In linking this year’s topic of the report to early warning of atrocity crimes, the Republic of Korea underlined the importance of synthesizing multiple early warning mechanisms and stated, “There are various systems communicating early signals on food insecurity, discrimination and human rights violations, and impunity. These should be carefully analyzed with an R2P lens moving forwards.”

Several states also highlighted the importance of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, humanitarian workers, media, religious and traditional leaders, women and young people can play in developing early warning and response systems at the national level by raising awareness about human rights violations and possible atrocity crimes. In this context, the Group of Friends of R2P emphasized that “Expertise of civil society actors can – and should – substantively inform discussions among policy- and decision-makers, including the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and R2P, in relation to atrocity prevention and R2P, particularly through the inclusion of the voices and needs of local actors and communities directly affected by ongoing atrocities.”

Many speakers also emphasized the importance of the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and R2P sharing early warning with other UN organs, including the Security Council (UNSC), the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council (HRC). The Group of Friends of R2P urged the two UN Special Advisers to “regularly provide the necessary early warning assessments and recommendations on how to prevent atrocities, including

to the Security Council, General Assembly and the Human Rights Council.” In encouraging the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and R2P to issue statements on specific country situations and to provide thematic briefings and country analysis at appropriate meetings, Germany stressed that “the systematic sharing of information and analysis with the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council can contribute significantly to meaningful prevention.”

## *The role of the UN Security Council*

Member states recognized the important role the UNSC, the General Assembly and the HRC have in addressing atrocity risks, responding to emerging and unfolding crises, and preventing further escalation. Liechtenstein noted that “R2P continues to evolve both politically and legally. It has been invoked by the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Human Rights Council in over 200 resolutions, and it has featured in even more debates.” Seventy-four states and the EU highlighted the important role the UNSC has as the primary organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security and in ensuring timely and decisive action in the case of mass atrocities.

While emphasizing the importance of prevention, Slovenia underlined that “when conflicts do happen, it is the Security Council that holds the greatest responsibility and should act as such.” In this context, many states expressed concern regarding ongoing UNSC inaction in situations where states have manifestly failed to uphold their responsibility to protect vulnerable populations. Jordan stressed that “the current structure of the Council undermines its capacity to respond to R2P crimes. Serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law continue to slip past the Council mired in political disunity, selectively referring situations to the [International Criminal] Court or using the veto has only benefited politicians seeking impunity.” According to Iran, “the failure to effectively prevent atrocity crimes can be attributed more to the failures of the Security Council rather than due to the lack of a relevant normative framework.”

Several member states referred to the tools the UNSC has at their disposal to contribute to atrocity prevention and stressed the need for better use of these tools. Bulgaria called upon the UNSC to “regain focus on prevention” and stated that “resuming the horizon scanning exercise on atrocities risks by the Security Council and regular conduct of field visits to meet and listen to all stakeholders would be welcome steps” in further

operationalizing R2P. Some member states also called for great cooperation between various UN bodies and the UNSC. For example, Hungary advised that “member states should explore possibilities for greater engagement of the Peacebuilding Commission in helping states and advising the UN Security Council to fulfil their obligations relating to R2P.”

Various initiatives aimed at guiding the voting behavior of UNSC members were mentioned by 70 states and the EU, including the ACT Code of Conduct and the French-Mexican initiative on the use of veto in the case of mass atrocities, as well as last year’s UN General Assembly resolution 76/262 entitled, “Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council.”

### *Cross-cutting issues*

As result of the topic of this year’s report, many states linked R2P and atrocity prevention to UN agendas related to development, as well as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. According to Bulgaria, almost 20 years after R2P’s inception, “the interconnectivity between the R2P, the Development agenda, the peacebuilding activities and the WPS agenda clearly established.” Some member states called for a better integration of the UN system to be able to respond effectively to global challenges. In this context, Brazil called for “increased cooperation between the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, and the Peacebuilding Commission” in order to tackle global development concerns in a more integrated and effective manner.

Related to the relationship between development and atrocity prevention, member states raised concern about the impacts of climate change as a threat multiplier of atrocities and the importance of global cooperation in tackling these issues. Costa Rica acknowledged that “as climate change worsens, environmental degradation is exacerbated, potentially leading to conflicts over scarce resources, such as water, land, and others.” It is therefore that the international community “needs to address the drivers that perpetuate human suffering, including climate change, and invest in prevention, to protect their people from atrocities,” according to Albania.

Calling attention for the challenges of addressing the root causes of conflicts and insecurity and the need for greater global solidarity and UN leadership, The Gambia, underlined that they would like to see “increased cooperation in addressing the risk of atrocity crimes, and

in fighting poverty, climate change, conflicts, and global insecurity.” The Gambia also called upon the international community to intensify its collective efforts toward achieving “the goals and targets of Agenda 2063, including those of the Silencing the Guns in Africa initiative.”

The WPS agenda also featured prominently in the debate as 33 states and the EU referred to the important link between R2P and advancing gender equality and the roles of women in atrocity prevention, as well as the unique ways in which certain atrocity crimes affect women. Germany stressed the importance of the WPS agenda in addressing the gendered dimensions of conflicts and atrocity crimes. Ireland underlined the importance of ensuring the implementation of the WPS agenda, “to achieve women’s full participation and leadership in the prevention and resolution of conflict.”

Several speakers also highlighted the continuing need to confront incitement to violence, hate speech and propaganda campaigns that target specific groups, as well as social and religious marginalization, which, when combined with other root causes and risk factors, can create an environment conducive for the commission of atrocity crimes.

## **CONCLUSION**

The General Assembly plenary meeting featured diverse perspectives on how to overcome the challenges in implementing R2P and mobilizing collective action for the prevention of mass atrocities. While acknowledging that ongoing atrocities are a constant reminder of the gap that remains between the promise and reality of R2P, states constructively discussed practical steps to better uphold their individual and collective responsibilities.

Several states raised the important upcoming 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the R2P principle in 2025 by underlining the timely opportunity this provides to take stock of all measures taken to successfully uphold R2P, discuss challenges that hamper the full implementation of the principle, as well as looking forward on how to improve and enhance the protection of vulnerable populations from atrocity crimes. Croatia stated that “the anniversary is the perfect time to review what has been achieved and what lies ahead. Let us use the time until 2025 to identify challenges, gather best practices and think of solutions.” Djibouti encouraged the international community to “take the upcoming 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a clarion call to action to perfect the Responsibility to Protect.”