



United Nations Secretary-General

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Secretary-General's Remarks to General Assembly informal dialogue on the responsibility to protect [as delivered]

The report that informs today's dialogue is my first on the responsibility to protect.

It comes at a time when the need for strengthened efforts to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity remains as strong as ever.

These crimes are not on the retreat.

Civilians, including women and children, are being killed either deliberately or as victims of indiscriminate attacks.

As a consequence, we have recorded the high number of refugees and internally displaced people.

Caring about them was my former responsibility. Now, as Secretary-General, I also have an obligation to address the reasons why they are fleeing: conflict and atrocity crimes.

We must do more, and we must do better, to reverse these negative trends. In this report I propose concrete measures, trying to achieve this.

The report reflects my conviction that the United Nations must give far greater attention to addressing problems before they escalate and spiral out of control.

Prioritizing prevention means setting an agenda that must include practical measures.

In this report, I suggest some options for steps that could be taken in a relatively short period of time, without major operational or institutional requirements. They are addressed to Member States as well as to intergovernmental organizations, including regional organizations and the United Nations itself. I am strongly committed to improving the capacity and coordination of the United Nations in atrocity prevention.

The responsibility to protect still generates some discomfort for a number of States.

The main concern is that the principle will be used to impose international approaches on national problems, in ways that may harm national sovereignty.

As you know from my statements to the General Assembly, the Security Council and elsewhere, I have deep respect for national sovereignty. Indeed, the success of the United Nations in implementing its mandates depends on national actors being able to deliver on their sovereign responsibilities.

Our shared challenge is to use the principle of the responsibility to protect to achieve the goals that were originally envisaged. I am convinced that open and constructive discussion among concerned States can overcome any remaining differences.

Toward that end, the current informal dialogue format has advanced consensus on the principle and has contributed to articulating an agenda for prevention.

At the same time, I know that a number of States have proposed including the responsibility to protect on the formal agenda of the General Assembly.

That would allow a combination of informal discussions during the year – the practice that my Special Adviser has been conducting – and formal dialogue with the aim of enhancing our efforts to prevent the reoccurrence of atrocity crimes.

Other organs, especially the Human Rights Council and the Security Council, can also consider practical steps to strengthen their capacity to prevent, and to be able in prevention to address the risks of crimes and other violations to the responsibility to protect.

We should also improve our use of all three UN pillars – peace and security, development and human rights – for early warning and prevention, as envisaged in the Human Rights up Front action plan.

Let us also openly discuss the responsibility of the Security Council in the prevention of atrocity crimes. By confronting misunderstandings and deficiencies in our past responses we can improve our efforts and overcome the political disagreements and the distrust that is so often at the heart of the UN's weaknesses in effective prevention.

In this regard, we have to keep as our reference the World Summit outcome document that was unanimously accepted in 2005. According to the relevant paragraphs, states have the primary responsibility to protect their populations. But there is another dimension: to assist other States if they do not possess the necessary capacity to prevent crimes in their territory.

But should national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, then we must be prepared to take collective action, in accordance with the Charter, including Chapter VII, on a case-by-case basis.

This year's dialogue takes place against a backdrop of brutality in many parts of the world.

All of us are well aware of the grim human reality that lies behind the words, 'war crimes', 'crimes against humanity', 'ethnic cleansing', and 'genocide'.

Bringing these together under the responsibility to protect was a signal advancing the collective solidarity and resolve.

It is time to move beyond the conceptual debate towards improved protection of people from atrocity crimes.

Thank you.