

Media Release

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General Assembly Debate on the Responsibility to Protect concludes with calls for implementation of the norm

The General Assembly debate on the Responsibility to Protect ended Tuesday after three days of statements by Member States. Governments demonstrated not only intense interest in the debate, but made a strong show of support for implementing their 2005 consensus commitment to prevent and halt genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. A clear majority of Member States called on the General Assembly to continue its consideration of how best to protect the world's populations from the gravest crimes.

“We estimate nearly 75 of the 93 Member States participating in the General Assembly debate gave strong statements in support of the Responsibility to Protect and put forward valid and useful questions about its implementation within the United Nations. This is a clear global commitment to continue working to finally bring about an end to the kinds of atrocities that led to the founding of the United Nations in 1945,” said William Pace, Executive Director of WFM-Institute for Global Policy, host of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP).

Several Member States gave powerful testimony about the hope of peoples around the world for responsible government and an international community that is not indifferent to their suffering. Representatives of countries that have endured human tragedies on a grand scale, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Timor-Leste and Kenya reflected upon their own experiences of either receiving support from the international community to end the violence or being abandoned by an international community that knew of their suffering, but chose to do nothing.

“It is our considered view that the debate on the Secretary-General's report on implementing the Responsibility to Protect should not be an exercise in intellectual posturing or an opportunity to grind political axes or to engage in polemics; it is simply about the value we place upon human life,” said Eugene-Richard Gasana, Permanent Representative of Rwanda to the United Nations in his statement to the General Assembly on 24 July 2009.

Rwanda's Ambassador was one of many diplomats to strongly counter the attempts of General Assembly President Miguel D'Escoto and a few government detractors, such as Sri Lanka, Sudan and North Korea, to turn the debate away from a discussion of how to implement the agreed concept of RtoP and toward an unwieldy debate on the consequences of colonialism. In his closing remarks at the debate, Mr. D'Escoto made a last-minute attempt to frame the debate with his personal negative views on the concept of RtoP, which had been rejected in most governments' statements.

Civil society organizations particularly welcomed the recognition by several Member States of the role of civil society in building the capacity of governments to prevent and halt mass atrocities. Included in the recommendations for how to move RtoP forward, was the suggestion to support exchange between regional organizations on the best practices to prevent genocide and other grave crimes. Ghana praised the cooperative arrangements between a number of civil society organizations and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to conduct early warning and preventive action.

On Wednesday, 29 July 2009, Ms. Thelma Ekiyor, Executive Director of the West Africa Civil Society Institute and Chair of the ICRtoP, said “While clarifying continuing misconceptions through education and outreach is essential, now the challenge for civil society groups worldwide is to improve and build the capacity of sub-regional, regional and international institutions to ensure that the norm is working properly to protect populations from mass atrocities.”

Reflecting on the debate, Sapna Chhatpar, Project Manager for ICRtoP, said, “While some of the spoilers might have been surprised by the diversity of support for the Responsibility to Protect from across regions, we were not. Our coalition had strong evidence of the widespread support for this concept following consultations in five regions. This is a truly global commitment to end mass atrocities, one that reaches across north-south and rich-poor divides.”

Note to press:

*The **INTERNATIONAL COALITION FOR THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT (ICRtoP)** is a group of 16 NGOs from all regions of the world working to strengthen normative consensus for RtoP, further the understanding of the norm, push for strengthened capacities to prevent and halt genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and mobilize NGOs to push for action to save lives in RtoP country-specific situations.*

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