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By Roger Cohen  
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(...) Annan, arriving [in Kenya] on Jan 22, had one obsession: "We can't let this happen to Kenya." Not after the one million dead between Rwanda and Darfur. Not after his UN tenure produced agreement at the world summit of 2005 on "**R2P**" the global "**responsibility to protect**" citizens in states whose own governments prove unable to do so.

"Kenya had been the safe haven in a tumultuous region and suddenly Kenya itself was going," Annan said. "And when you have ethnic violence, if you don't mediate quickly, you get a hopeless situation."

(...) We've seen this movie once too often since the Cold War ended.

(...) A regional organization, in this case the African Union, takes the lead in providing a mandate for swift preventive action. The UN Security Council issues a supportive statement. American power is used, not in sledgehammer mode, but with well-timed discretion. Intervention is choreographed by a single authoritative figure prepared to stay five weeks for peace.

(...) "It took a while to convince them that there was no way either side could run the country without the other, that it was a perfect political gridlock," Annan [says].

He got a German official to explain grand coalitions. He got Jakaya Kikwete, the Tanzanian leader, to talk about how presidents and prime ministers work together. He was helped by President George W. Bush declaring during his recent African visit that "there ought to be a power sharing agreement."

Kibaki's foreign minister retorted that Kenya would not be "given conditions by foreign states" - the old anti-imperialist thing. But this was international intervention of another kind. The pressure cornered Kibaki. He ceded, empowering Odinga as a prime minister with authority anchored by constitutional change.

"When we talk of intervention, people think of the military," Annan said. "But under **R2P**, force is a last resort. Political and diplomatic intervention is the first mechanism. And I think we've seen a successful example of its application."

Some will quibble over technicalities, but Kenya kindled the somnolent spirit of **R2P**. We've also seen American might in subtler guise: listening better, applying soft power. That's another reason what happened in Nairobi matters so much.

Source of information:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/03/opinion/03cohen.html?ref=opinion>