

When Reality contradicts Rhetoric: Civilian's Protection in the DRC

allafrica.com

Dr. Joseph Yav Katshung

30 October 2008

Dr. Joseph Yav Katshung is a Human Rights Lawyer and a Transitional Justice Advocate. He is also the UNESCO Chair for Human Rights, Good Governance, Peace, and Conflict Resolution at University of Lubumbashi in DRC.

In September 2005, world leaders at the United Nations endorsed a historic declaration that the international community has a **responsibility to help protect** populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity and expressed a willingness to take timely and decisive action when states manifestly fail to protect their own populations from these threats.

Despite the collective shame and regret expressed over genocides and related atrocities, gross violations of human rights, and mass killings continue in the Great lakes region of Africa and in DRC in particular. Conflict, violence and religious radicalism continue to undermine the maintenance of peace and security and the promotion of human rights in the region. Civilians bear the heaviest brunt of acts of terror, wars, and criminal violence. How best to effectively respond to this threat, is the central question this brief sets out to discuss.

Protecting civilians in the DRC: A nightmare?

A clear picture of civilian suffering in the DRC has just been painted in the second Cross-Cutting Report of the Security Council Report dealing with Protection of Civilians. It is clear from this report that over the past 14 years, the DRC has experienced continuous instability and a civil war that took an extremely heavy toll on the civilian population. The numbers are vast: from the spill-over from the Rwandan genocide in 1994, to the 1996-1998 and the 1998-2003 civil wars and the ensuing political transitions, millions of civilians died of conflict-related causes and hundreds of thousands of others were displaced. The second civil war alone is estimated to have led to the death of between 3.3 and 5.4 million civilians, which ranks it as the world's deadliest conflict since World War II. The war involved dozens of rebel groups-both Congolese and foreign, including Rwandan mercenaries, the LRA and the Angolan UNITA-in addition to other African countries: Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Sudan, Angola, Zimbabwe, Chad and Namibia. ()

With political will, rhetoric can be transformed into reality

With sufficient political will - on the part of Africa and on the part of the international community protecting civilians in Africa can be enhanced. Governments must not wait to act until images of death, destruction and mass displacements are shown on TV screens. With political will, rhetoric can be transformed into reality. Without it, not even the noblest sentiments will have a chance of success. Political will is also needed from the international community. Whenever the international community is committed to making a difference, it has proved that significant and rapid transformation can be achieved. Yet significant progress will require sustained international attention at the highest political levels over a period of years.

On a continent where gross human rights abuses and violence are rampant, African leaders have not demonstrated the will to exercise the African Unions right to intervene to stem gross human rights violations in either a concerted or consistent manner. Yet the involvement of the international community and of African states in particular in seeking to promote peace and security remains ad hoc and inconsistent. Generating the political will to protect civilians remains therefore a priority in Africa. With sufficient political will - on the part of Africa and on the part of the international community protection of civilians in Africa can be enhanced. Genocide and other related atrocities are not only a dark legacy of the past but a threat to the present and future of many societies.

It is Time to Demonstrate that Civilian Protection is a Shared Responsibility!

It should be noted that civilian protection is not just a responsibility of the government, armed forces, and other security apparatus but rather a collective and shared responsibility of the state, civil society groups and the international community. In this regard, the responses to protect civilians should immensely benefit from Václav Havel's sagacious words, we live in a new world, in which all of us must begin to bear responsibility for everything that occurs. Besides a strong commitment, effective protection of civilians requires resources. Over time, civilian protection must not only become a norm but also a practice. Its success as a norm will rightly be judged on whether it has reduced the vulnerability of civilian populations to armed conflict, and on the extent to which human rights and humanitarian obligations are observed and enforced. Successful implementation of protection strategies requires the development of a comprehensive and holistic approach to security combined with the necessary political will.

Source: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200810310726.html>