

## Prevention, promotion and protection: our shared responsibility

Kofi Annan April 2012 (...)

Over the years, international laws and institutions have been developed to promote and protect human rights and to prohibit, prevent and punish the worst international crimes. State sovereignty is no longer an absolute shield behind which governments may hide to do what they please. Beyond formal laws and institutions, we have also seen the growth in all regions of the world of an active civil society dedicated to the cause of human rights.

(...)

We have now tipped the balance, I believe irreversibly, towards accountability.

So there has been progress. But I wonder, if Wallenberg were here with us today, what would be more surprising to him? Would it be the many international laws and institutions now in place to prohibit and, at least in theory, prevent and punish genocide and war crimes? Or the number of countries where allegations of abuse persist, the widespread use of torture, the extent of human trafficking, the targeting of civilians in conflict and the war criminals who remain free?

(...) I want to raise, in particular, two issues - the need to prevent and end armed conflict and the need to protect civilian lives while conflict persists. (...)

For many years, lawyers, scholars, activists and others within these countries have alerted us to what was happening. But in too many cases, the international community has ignored not only what they have said, but also the treatment these courageous individuals and groups have received. (...)

Research shows that the number and deadliness of civil wars has declined from their peak in the early 1990s. It is clear that the tools we have been deploying to prevent and end these conflicts do make a difference. Active mediation, the deployment of peacekeepers, and the sustained engagement and support of the international community in the post-conflict phase, all help explain why there are fewer deadly civil wars today. When the international community speaks with one voice, and moves swiftly to make clear its demand for a peaceful solution and negotiated transfers of power, then much can be achieved. On this point, much of the discussion in recent years has centred on the

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. Building on our evolved understanding of sovereignty,

### **R2P**

asserts that when states cannot or will not protect their populations from the worst crimes, other states, acting through the UN, should do so. The endorsement of this principle by UN Member States in 2005 was a momentous step. It made clear that hand-wringing and appeals to conscience by the international community are not enough. We must be ready to use all diplomatic, humanitarian and other means -- including targeted sanctions against the leaders responsible -- to protect populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity. It also means that, as a last resort, the international community will be prepared to take collective action, including military force, through the Security Council to protect populations from these crimes. We must be clear, however. Military action really must

be the last resort. It may be necessary in some situations but the decision must never be taken lightly. War, even when waged lawfully and in defence of threatened populations, is destructive and inherently unpredictable. Once engaged, the resort to force has its own logic. Hostilities may escalate quickly beyond a limited objective or outside intended boundaries. War waged against “terror” or to protect civilians may, unintentionally, have disastrous consequences. We also have to be realistic. Only on rare occasions will there be an international consensus in its favour or an international coalition willing to act.

Where a crisis occurs in an area of little strategic importance, where political will is lacking, or when the utility of a forceful response is in doubt, **R2P** may not offer much protection to those at risk – as we’ve seen in Darfur.

The reality is that military intervention to prevent mass atrocities will never be an easy option, and even where it is feasible it may be inadvisable. We must, therefore, devote our energies to strengthening and using those measures short of the use of force. These must include more effective and enforced use of targeted financial, travel, and economic sanctions on the leadership. We need to see greater use of anti-impunity measures such as international commissions of inquiry and threatened criminal prosecutions, including by referral to the International Criminal Court, as well as assistance to local human rights defenders, arms embargoes and other measures. Indeed, I believe such measures ought to be more systematically engaged as tools in the preventive diplomacy I spoke of earlier. Crimes against humanity may occur even before a conflict erupts. When they do, tough measures like threatened prosecutions must be invoked wherever possible. Their deterrent effect should not be under-estimated.

But given the reason for us meeting today, let us all remember that Wallenberg did not need sanctions or the threat of force to save thousands of lives. And in his memory, I want to emphasise what I consider to be an under-utilized protection tool - the deployment of civilians to act as skilled, independent and impartial monitors.

(...)

Just think what more we can accomplish knowing that our actions express the convictions of a worldwide human rights movement, and with the obvious force of international law behind us? This is the best way we can pay tribute to the courage and sacrifice of the man whose memory we celebrate today. Thank you. **Read the [full speech](#) .**