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During the campaign, Barack Obama hinted at how his future Administration might act to stop suffering in the world. American foreign policy should focus on more than just killing terrorists; it needs to address "challenges of the 21st century" such as "climate change and poverty, genocide and disease." Obama and his advisers all but called for Robert Mugabe's removal in Zimbabwe and advocated more aggressive U.S. action to halt the genocide in Darfur. "When genocide is happening," said candidate Obama during the second presidential debate, "when ethnic cleansing is happening somewhere around the world and we stand idly by, that diminishes us." The emerging Obama doctrine seemed to signal a new age of liberal interventionism the idea that the U.S. has a right and obligation to intervene, by force if necessary, to protect civilians from war and ethnic violence, even in places where the U.S. has no vital national interests at stake. ()

By the standard unanimously adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 2005, the targeting of Tamil civilians and the unwillingness of either side to protect them justifies foreign intervention. The **Responsibility to Protect** convention obligates U.N. member-states to step in if "national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity." That's an apt description of what's happening in Sri Lanka.

So why has the situation failed to trigger louder calls to action? Several factors make Sri Lanka an inconvenient place to apply the principles of liberal interventionism. First, the Sri Lankan government has successfully cast its campaign against Tamil separatists as of a piece with the U.S.-led war on terrorism; the Tigers invented suicide bombing and have until recently continued to target civilians in Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo. Second, the civil war between Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority and the LTTE has lasted 25 years and already claimed 70,000 lives. The world tends to view long-running civil wars as intractable and impervious to foreign intervention; only when both sides exhaust themselves, the thinking goes, can such wars be stopped. But the most vexing problem for interventionists is that in Sri Lanka, atrocities against civilians have manifestly been committed by both government forces and the rebels. There are no good guys.

Liberal interventionism works better in theory than in practice. No sovereign government accedes readily to foreign meddling in its own affairs, and liberals remain more reluctant than neoconservatives to insist on a moral right to intervene. Well-meaning "never again" resolutions like the **Responsibility to Protect** have too often been shown to be empty gestures, since they are so rarely backed up by action. That paralysis has been evident in the Obama Administration's response to Sri Lanka. ()

What more can be done? Plenty, actually. The U.S. could press for a U.N. Security Council resolution demanding that government forces adhere to a cease-fire and allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid. If that doesn't work, Washington can lean on India, the country with the most leverage over Colombo, to pressure the Sri Lankan government to halt its offensive. If that doesn't work, the Administration could impose economic sanctions against Sri Lanka, with

whom the U.S. did more than \$2 billion in trade last year. If that doesn't work, the U.S. could push to create safe havens inside the combat zone monitored by U.N. peacekeeping troops, as exists in the Congo.

Wouldn't that amount to taking sides in the conflict? Not really it would merely be balancing the score. The U.S. has already classified the LTTE as a terrorist organization, blocking its assets in the U.S. and making it a crime to provide funds to the group. We don't have much more leverage over terrorists. Targeting the government's interests as well would send the message that so long as the welfare of innocent civilians is ignored by the army and the rebels, both sides will feel pain. By intervening on behalf of Sri Lanka's civilians, Obama would do more than just save lives he could help to save the doctrine of liberal interventionism before it ends up in history's warehouse of good intentions. Because if he doesn't do it, who will?

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