

Ten years ago this month, as genocide unfolded in Rwanda and about 800,000 people were butchered in three months, the world bore silent and distant it was a failure of collective conscience, a failure of civic courage at the highest and most solemn levels of responsibility.

What if a coalition of the willing had been prepared to move in with military force, but the U.N. Security Council was deadlocked?

The worst act of domestic criminal behavior by a government is large-scale killings of its own people; the worst act of international criminal behavior, to attack another country But what if the second is a response to the first: if a country is invaded in order to halt killings inside it by the "legitimate" government--which already indicates a troubling appropriation and corruption of the word "legitimate"?

For answers to both these painful dilemmas, take a close look at the report, "The Responsibility to Protect (R2P)."

In order to ground outside intervention in more widely shared international morality, R2P changes "humanitarian intervention" into the "responsibility to protect," and pins that responsibility on state authorities and the U.N. Security Council

It is easy to justify any war by calling it "humanitarian intervention" and labeling critics as "anti-humanitarian." R2P more accurately captures the sense of solidarity without borders from which external help should spring.

We reconceptualize sovereignty as responsibility. In part, this expressed what we heard from a cross-section of Africans. Governments are responsible for the functions of protecting the safety and lives of citizens, and accountable internationally and domestically for their acts of commission and omission

We sought to define thresholds when conscience-shocking atrocities are so grave, they clearly require armed international intervention. To enhance the prospects of broad agreement for intervention, the circumstances have to be narrow, the bar high, and the procedural and operational safeguards tight

The goal is not to wage war on a state in order to destroy it, but to protect victims of atrocities inside the state, to embed the protection in reconstituted institutions after the intervention (nation-building), and then to withdraw all foreign troops.

The United Nations is the only international authority that can override national sovereignty. As we learn yet again in Iraq, it is easier to wage war without U.N. blessing than it is to win the peace--but victory in war is pointless without a resulting secure peace.

Thus the urgent task is not to evade or circumvent the United Nations, but to make it work better, to hold it in turn accountable for its responsibility to protect at the global level. If the United Nations fails in its duty, if it persists in being proof against occasions of the larger kind, if victims are let down yet again by the Security Council as in Rwanda, then others may well act

rather than do nothing.

[C]alls for military intervention happen. The challenge is neither to deny the reality of intervention nor to denounce it, but to manage it for the better, so that all of us come out of it better, with our common humanity not diminished, but enhanced.

Thakur, who is senior vice rector of the United Nations University (assistant secretary general of the United Nations), was a commissioner of the Ottawa-based International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty.

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