

Saviors or conquerors? UN mulls 'responsibility to protect' Posted by Louis Charbonneau, Patrick Worsnip (Reuters)

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What's more important — the right of a sovereign state to manage its affairs free of outside interference or the duty of the international community to intervene when massive human rights violations are being committed in a country?

The United Nations — nothing if not a talking shop — has been debating that question this week in the General Assembly. It goes to the heart of what the U.N. is all about.

(...)Cautious as it was, the summit document was seen by many advocacy groups as a step on the road to fulfilling their dream that if a government was committing atrocities against its people, the United Nations would march in and stop it.

In the real world, U.N. officials say, that is not going to happen, at least under the peacekeeping rules that have applied in recent decades. These do not authorize U.N. forces to go to war against the national army of a sovereign state — a move that would amount to invasion. Witness the six-year-old conflict in Sudan's western region of Darfur — branded by some as genocide — where a U.N./African Union peacekeeping force is only now being slowly deployed with the consent of the Khartoum government. The only time that R2P has been invoked in practice — and even then retrospectively — was in former U.N. secretary-General Kofi Annan's mission to mediate in post-election violence in Kenya last year, U.N. officials say.

This week's debate was to take stock of R2P and discuss how to take it forward, although no immediate action is expected. It came against the background of a determined attempt by radicals led by General Assembly President Miguel D'Escoto, a former Nicaraguan Sandinista government minister, to kick the issue into the long grass.

For D'Escoto and those who agree with him, R2P is code for an attempt by big Western powers to impose their will on the weak. In a contentious "concept note" issued to all U.N. members he declared that "colonialism and interventionism used 'responsibility to protect' arguments." One member of a panel of experts D'Escoto convened to launch the debate, U.S. academic Noam Chomsky, said R2P-type arguments had been used to justify Japan's 1931 invasion of Manchuria and Nazi Germany's pre-World War Two move into Czechoslovakia.

While some radical states, such as Venezuela, echoed D'Escoto's line in the assembly debate,

human rights groups expressed relief that most cautiously supported a strictly defined interpretation of R2P and backed proposals by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for developing it. Ban has proposed periodic reviews of how countries have implemented R2P and regular reports by himself on the issue. "To those that argued this week that the U.N. was not ready to make a reality of the commitment to end mass atrocities, the majority of the General Assembly gave its answer: you are wrong," said Monica Serrano of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. Despite that, there have been clear signs of concern among developing countries that unless tightly controlled, R2P could be used in support of future Iraq-style invasions of countries that have angered the big powers.

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