

UN debates responsibility to protect threatened populations

AFP 23 July 2009 The UN General Assembly on Thursday debated the contentious responsibility to protect populations threatened with genocide or war crimes, which some developing nations see as a Western ploy to meddle in their domestic affairs.

(...)Ahead of the debate, the president of the assembly, Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann of Nicaragua, convened a panel discussion Thursday with speakers including leading leftist US academic Noam Chomsky, a strong critic of "humanitarian imperialism."

D'Escoto, a former priest who served as foreign minister under the leftist Sandinista regime from 1979 to 1990, immediately echoed the suspicions of some developing countries about humanitarian intervention.

"Recent and painful memories related to the legacy of colonialism, give developing countries strong reasons to fear that laudable motives can end-up being misused, once more, to justify arbitrary and selective interventions against the weakest states," he noted.

"We must take into account the prevailing lack of trust from most of the developing countries when it comes to the use of force for humanitarian reasons."

In remarks to the Assembly Tuesday, Ban said his report was based on three pillars: state responsibility; international assistance and capacity-building and timely and decisive response.

"It seeks to situate the responsibility to protect squarely under the UN roof and within our Charter, where it belongs," he added, stressing the need for the world body to sharpen its capacities for early warning and assessment.

"When prevention fails, the United Nations needs to pursue an early and flexible response tailored to the circumstances of each case. Military action is a measure of last, not first, resort and should only be undertaken in accordance with the provisions of the Charter," Ban said.

But in an apparent dig at d'Escoto, he pointedly urged UN member states to "resist those who try to change the subject or turn our common effort to curb the worst atrocities in human history into a struggle over ideology, geography or economics."

In his remarks to the assembly, Chomsky cited numerous historical and modern-day examples -- from early American colonialists to Nazi strategy -- where principles similar to those that underpin R2P were applied to justify political or imperialistic agendas.

"Virtually every use of force in international affairs has been justified in humanitarian terms, even the worst monsters," Chomsky said."

"The responsibility to protect does not alter the legal obligation of member states to refrain from the use of force except in conformity with the Charter. Rather it reinforces this obligation," Edward Luck, a special adviser to Ban on R2P, quoted the UN secretary general as saying.

Gareth Evans, a former Australian foreign minister and president emeritus of the independent International Crisis Group, noted that the issue "is not the right of big states to do anything, including throwing their weight around militarily, but the responsibility of all states to protect their own people from atrocity crimes, and to assist others to do so by all appropriate means."

"The question of reaction, through diplomatic pressure, through sanctions, through international criminal prosecutions and ultimately through military action, arises only if prevention has failed."

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