

Responsibility to Protect: A Natural Humanitarian Response The Island Online UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict,
Radhika Coomaraswamy

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The following excerpts are from an op-ed addressed to Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights in Sri Lanka. The Op-ed responds to sharp criticism of

Radhika Coomaraswamy's interactions with the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Sri Lanka and to discussions held at the time on whether crimes committed against civilians by the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE from January-May 2009 reached the threshold of an RtoP situation.

(...)

Responsibility to protect

is rooted in the most basic of human impulses- the desire to protect the weak and the vulnerable and those who are at the receiving end of brutality. To say this is "western" is sometimes to imply that third world people do not have or value this basic impulse. Surely that cannot be true. Buddhism perhaps more than any other religion values the need to be compassionate to the weak. And it is not only western countries that have marched in to save others. We must remember that it was Tanzania that marched into Uganda to save its people from Idi Amin; that it was Vietnam that marched into Cambodia to save its people from Pol Pot and India into Bangladesh. In recent times, the terrible failure in Rwanda and the unilateral action in terms of Iraq is what prompted Secretary General Kofi Annan to try and develop a rational coherent doctrine that would guide international action, not leaving it to the whims and fancies of individual states.

Yes, Mr. Wijesinha, I am a strong proponent of this natural human impulse which has resulted in doctrines such as the responsibility to protect- though I completely agree with those who state that the how is also very important- how do we structure this doctrine so that it will be applied in fair and equitable manner. In discussing this issue we must also try and see what is best for the international system. Even in Sri Lanka, we do not know what the future holds- what if we are invaded and terrible massacres take place? What if Prabhakaran won the war and we had a fascist state in the North? We must not be so narrowly focused on our present interests that we do not see the bigger picture and the need for appropriate international measures.(...)

The attempt by many in Sri Lanka to day to depict human rights and the international struggle against war crimes as a western campaign does not do justice to so many in developing societies that have fought for freedom and justice. As I said the campaign against apartheid, the terrible disappearances in Latin America during military regimes, the campaign against torture were not only waged by western countries- these are collective struggles which we should not

seek to diminish even if we are doing our job in defending the interests of the country. And what is sadder, all the commentaries on responsibility to protect and human rights, do not say a word about the victim.

As Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and now as Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict I have met so many victims of terrible violations and heinous crimes in every conflict zone in the world. These intellectual arguments on the responsibility to protect and sovereignty just ring hollow when you actually meet innocent victims. They are a reminder that sovereign nation states are not the only entities that matter; there are victims. If we care about the world, we must create the conditions so that heinous violations do not occur and if they do occur that there is redress. We cannot become a nation of callous people and turn our back on human rights. Even in the rhetoric we use to defend national interest, do we need to be so insensitive to the suffering of people?

The other argument that is used and has some validity is the argument that there are double standards in the world and until everyone is equal we cannot support doctrines like the responsibility to protect. (...) The solution to double standards and to protect national interest in terms of humanitarian military intervention is to ensure that structures will exist to prevent abuse. At the moment any such "military" action requires the vote of the Security Council. Only situations where everyone agrees, including China and Russia- would be eligible for such military intervention. One must agree that a situation where all five members would agree that there is a need for such intervention would be a particularly heinous situation. All members of the Council and the General Assembly, however, do believe in the first two pillars of **R2P** including the need for robust diplomacy. (...) Responsibility to protect is now being discussed and its contours are at present being imagined and constructed. It is important that we be part of the debate. I have deliberately avoided any reference to Sri Lanka because I feel that our attitude to our own conflict colours what we feel about the doctrine. Now that the war is over, let us restore some sobriety and balance to our dealings with the outside world on issues such as these and let our diplomats be true to our values and have the freedom to work toward what is right not only for a future Sri Lanka but also for the world.

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