

Remarks by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at a lunch hosted by the American Society of International Law (ASIL) UN-Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon 7 May 2012 (...)

Let me begin with a statement of the obvious: everything that the UN does is firmly grounded in law. When I took my oath of office as UN Secretary-General, I placed my hand on the UN Charter. It opens with a pledge to establish conditions for justice and respect for international law. The law underpins all three pillars of the United Nations: peace and security, development and human rights. Respect for the rule of law is what gives a child his birth certificate ... a widow her equality before the courts ... a worker her protections ... and an accused a fair trial. Calls for the rule of law inspired many of the democracy protests that changed our world over the past year. Citizens continue risking their lives to demand justice. They want an end to corruption. They want laws to apply equally. They are sick of kleptocracy.

This cry for justice is universal and unstoppable. We saw it answered in Tunisia, Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire and Libya. I am proud that, in a number of cases, the United Nations helped the will of the people to prevail. But precisely because we have been helping countries through transitions, we know that the road ahead is long and hard. Overthrowing one order does not establish the next. Ideals and expectations can quickly sour into cynicism and recriminations. That is why it is critical to consolidate progress.

I am very concerned about a number of situations where the rule of law is fragile or failing. In my position as Secretary-General, I am constantly on the phone with leaders trying to calm tensions. Day and night I receive reports from my peacekeeping operations about disturbing signs of violence. And I have to anticipate how shifts in power today will affect alliances and hotspots tomorrow.

I am concerned about fighting on the border between Sudan and South Sudan. I am worried about Mali, where fighting could reverberate across the region. And I am especially disturbed by the blood that continues to spill in Syria.

(...)

In Syria and elsewhere, the United Nations is addressing challenges the same way a good lawyer would approach a case: carefully, systematically, and using all of our best tools.

Our newest tool is the
Responsibility to Protect

If someone hears their neighbour beating a child, they have a responsibility to intervene. It would be immoral and unacceptable to simply stand by knowing that child was being abused.

R2P

gives expression to a growing, global conviction that it is immoral and unacceptable for States to commit or allow serious international crimes against their people. It holds the international community responsible for preventing and addressing these crimes.

Last year,

R2P

went through the reality test — and passed. The results were not perfect, but tens of thousands of lives were saved in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, in Yemen and Libya. We took action in support of the solemn promise that was made over the graves of Srebrenica and Rwanda. We pledged to do more when faced with acts or threats of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes or crimes against humanity.

Protecting civilians from these atrocity crimes is a defining purpose of the United Nations in the twenty-first century.

I visited a site of mass killings in Libya. I was deeply shaken. You could smell the corpses — somebody's father, somebody's friend, killed for a dictator. It was a chilling reminder of what more could have happened if we did not live up to our Responsibility to Protect.

Accountability lies first with States. But if States are unwilling or unable to investigate and prosecute atrocity crimes, the world must step in. Governments may blatantly disregard their responsibilities — but the international community will not.

Not so long ago, if you killed one person, you were punished. If you killed thousands, however, you went free. The United Nations helped create the International Criminal Court to remedy that. The ICC is at the heart of our efforts to end impunity. The Court is our chance and our means to advance justice, reduce suffering and prevent international crimes.

(...) International justice is proving its power. Less than two weeks ago, former Liberian President Charles Taylor was found guilty for his crimes by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. This was a victory for all of the children who were turned into soldiers ... all the women who were raped and mutilated ... all the people who were killed ... all those who suffered from the actions of groups that Mr. Taylor supported. And it was a victory for everyone who demands

justice. The case against Charles Taylor showed that executive mansions built on blood and theft are no protection against the law. He was not the first head of State to commit international crimes in office. And I am convinced he will not be the last to pay for his acts. This is not only my prediction – it is my warning to leaders, especially those in Syria, who commit or direct atrocity crimes.

(...)

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I think of what a difference the United Nations can make, I think of a boy from Uganda who got caught up in the war there.

His name is Alfred Orono. He was twelve years old when he first held a gun -- not even a teenager. Eventually he had to flee, but he was captured and thrown into prison. He nearly died from hunger and disease. Finally, he escaped. He walked 50 miles, bleeding from cuts and hiding from rebels, until he got to Kenya. There he saw something that gave him hope. It was the blue flag of the United Nations. He had reached a UN refugee camp. He started working there. He got a scholarship. He studied law. Now he works for us. The former child soldier is a prosecutor at the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

After what he has seen in life, Alfred Orono concluded, and I quote: “We are all capable of the most monstrous things ... but we are also capable of the most glorious and selfless actions.”

Let us continue using the power of the law to fight the monstrous ... and to uphold the selfless and the glorious ... in everything we do.

Thank you.

Read the
[full statement](#)

.