

Remarks by Deputy Secretary General at ministerial breakfast on RtoP UN Department of Public Information

28 September 2012

Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson gave the following address during the 28 September 2012 ministerial breakfast meeting on the Responsibility to Protect: Deepening our Commitment to Mass Atrocity Prevention, in New York.

(...) I am honoured to represent the Secretary-General at this ministerial meeting on the responsibility to protect. This is the fifth time that such a gathering has been organized during the opening week of the General Assembly. I take this as a sign of our common commitment to strengthen this important concept.

When the responsibility to protect was on the table at the 2005 World Summit, I was eager, as incoming President and, later, President of the Assembly, to see the full membership endorse the concept. Humanitarian intervention in the early 1990s was considered as an infringement on sovereignty.

The negotiations in 2005 were difficult. But in the end, the declaration marked a major step forward — a breakthrough. States' responsibility for the protection and security of its people was established.

“Each individual State”, it read, “has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity [...] We accept that responsibility and will act in accordance with it”. After a twentieth century of atrocities and systematic murder, the new millennium began with an encouraging new commitment.

Today, we can all see both progress and problems in bringing the concept to life. Progress, in that UN bodies are more willing to include “R2P” language in their resolutions, and to consider application of R2P when grave violations of human rights take place. But also problems in that international disagreements on how to respond to crises, including Libya and Syria, have put into question the collective aspiration embodied in the 2005 declaration.

As you remember, we discussed some of these issues at the Assembly's informal dialogue earlier this month. There are concerns about consistency in applying the responsibility to protect, and about oversight of Security Council mandates.

But despite some differences, the debate showed that there is agreement among the great majority of Member States on the principles of the concept. The responsibility to protect is here to stay. Brazil's proposals on "responsibility while protecting" were helpful in arriving at this consensus.

However, making R2P a "living reality" requires more effort. Beyond invoking the concept whenever and wherever it applies, we need to ensure that we have the tools and partnerships for its implementation.

In speaking about the responsibility to protect in January, the Secretary-General called for 2012 to be the "year of prevention". R2P is basically a tool of prevention. This is a collective undertaking.

We need a shared understanding of the factors that can increase the risk of mass atrocity crimes. We need to tailor our assistance to States at risk in each case in a way that reflects the specific context. And we need to develop strategies for prevention-oriented engagement with civil society organizations. We need to reach out to a wider public about the R2P and, of course, about the horrors of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Many UN agencies, funds and departments undertake work that helps to reduce risk — for example, by supporting States in building institutions that respect human rights and the rule of law.

But we need to go further to develop assistance and initiatives that can prevent escalation of situations where we can identify the risk of the four crimes listed in R2P. That means doing more to mainstream efforts to implement the responsibility to protect throughout the Organization.

The output of the Human Rights Council and other UN human rights mechanisms could, for example, be drawn on more concertedly in shaping policy-making across the Organization. At the same time, let us be clear: as much as the United Nations can do to help prevent atrocity crimes, the first resort is Member States themselves, working at home, with their citizens, to uphold their responsibilities.

That is why I strongly encourage the appointment of national focal points for R2P by Member States, and commend the initiative of Costa Rica, Denmark and Ghana in this regard.

We must not move backward. States have a responsibility to implement their obligations under

international humanitarian, refugee and human rights law. We must not move backward. We must all do our part to make the responsibility to protect, not just a core commitment of the organization, but also an operational reality in the lives of people. Thank you.

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