

“Timely and Decisive Response”: Summary of the Informal Interactive Dialogue of the UN General Assembly on the Responsibility to Protect held on 5 September 2012 Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

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On 5 September 2012, fifty-eight member states, one regional organization and two civil society organizations participated in the fourth United Nations (UN) informal interactive dialogue on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) held in the UN General Assembly (UNGA).¹ The dialogue on “timely and decisive response” marked an important turning point in member states’ discussions on R2P. For the first time in an interactive dialogue the majority of states focused their contributions on how best to operationalize R2P, rather than debate its status or whether it should be implemented.

This shift stems in part from the UN Security Council’s (UNSC) 2011 invocation of R2P in resolutions mandating Chapter VII missions to protect civilians from mass atrocities in Libya and Côte d’Ivoire. This experience has made the implementation of R2P and its most controversial aspect, the use of force as a coercive tool of last resort, more than an abstraction. Libya, Côte d’Ivoire and the plight of civilians in Syria today was at the fore of many states’ comments as they reflected upon the challenges arising from the operationalization of R2P. The dialogue confirmed that there has been no diminution of the norm and that, as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted in his opening address, “R2P’s time has come.”

There was widespread acceptance that the international community must move towards outlining tangible steps that states can take at the domestic, regional and international level to uphold R2P. Many states outlined the efforts they are taking to uphold R2P domestically, including through the appointment of a senior-level government official to serve as a national R2P Focal Point.

The 2012 dialogue saw an increase in the number and diversity of states participating. When compared with opposition to R2P in 2005 or 2009, the 2012 dialogue saw only two states, Cuba and Venezuela, remaining as outright opponents of the norm. A number of states did, however, voice constructive concerns about how best to implement and advance R2P. For example, states stressed that R2P must be applied in a consistent manner to avoid allegations of double standards, and points of disagreement remained regarding the sequencing of the three pillars and how and when to resort to the use of force.

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