

Time to Rethink Protection as Syrian Mistakes Echo Sri Lanka

The Global Observatory

Alex J. Bellamy

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Residents of the Syrian town of Madaya are again reported to be near starvation. The United Nations is said to have underestimated the number suffering under blockades enforced by Bashar al-Assad's government, adding to earlier accusations that the UN deliberately failed to highlight the problem. The revelations show much more needs to be done to implement Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Human Rights Up Front action plan and mainstream the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine.

The government's January siege on the rebel-held Madaya caused severe malnourishment among the civilian population, with as many as 70 people starving to death. As the Secretary-General has explained, both the denial of humanitarian access and the adoption of tactics designed to harm the civilian population constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In a January briefing, Ban told the UN General Assembly that "The town has been the victim of deliberate starvation. Let me be clear: the use of food as a weapon of war is a war crime. All sides, including the Syrian government, which has the primary responsibility to protect Syrians, are committing atrocious acts prohibited under international humanitarian law."

But it has also emerged that UN officials in Damascus knew about the situation in Madaya as early as July last year and, fearing that it would jeopardize already fraught relations with the Syrian government, chose not to highlight it publicly. Four senior UN officials and two aid workers told The Guardian that "access to [Syrian] officials had been prioritized over access to areas in need, meaning aid goals had often not been met."

These individuals suggested that showing respect for Syrian sovereignty had been prioritized over humanitarian assistance, despite the fact that UN Security Council Resolution 2165 expressly permits the delivery of aid into Syria without the government's consent. What is more, the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reportedly insisted on the deletion of the words "siege" and "besieged" from the UN's humanitarian reports and plans. Privately,

some humanitarian workers have lamented the cozy relationships established between UN officials and Syrian government officials in Damascus, reporting that the UN has at times even employed members of the Assad regime.

The parallels between this and the UN's response to the humanitarian crisis that befell Sri Lanka in 2009 are striking. Then, the organization's humanitarian officials refused to speak out about alleged violations of international humanitarian law, fearing that the government would respond by restricting access. They even went as far as to publicly disown civilian casualty estimates publicized by the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights. In the end, the government restricted access anyway.

(...)

Over the last seven years, the General Assembly has held a series of informal dialogues on R2P at which states of all shapes, sizes, and orientations have earnestly pledged their deep commitment to the prevention of atrocity crimes. It is time to test the depth of their commitment by developing, in consultation with member states, and implementing, through the appropriate UN organs, a comprehensive system-wide strategy for preventing atrocities and protecting populations.

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