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When a parent abuses or neglects a child, government steps in to offer protection. But who steps in when government abuses or neglects its people?

Nearly three years ago, the United Nations announced an answer to that question: It would. At a summit celebrating the organization's 60th birthday, 171 nations agreed that they would intervene, forcefully if necessary, if a state failed to protect its own people. The action was seen as both a sign of remorse for the failure to stop genocide in Rwanda and a rebuke to the United States and its unilateral ways.

"I'm delighted that the **responsibility to protect**, a Canadian idea, now belongs to the world," said Canada's prime minister at the time, Paul Martin. "The United Nations will not find itself turning away or averting its gaze."

Since then the United Nations has averted its gaze as Sudan's government continues to ravage the people of Darfur. It has turned away as Zimbabwe's rulers terrorize their own people. Now it is bowing to Burma's sovereignty as that nation's junta allows more than a million victims of Cyclone Nargis to face starvation, dehydration, cholera and other miseries rather than allow outsiders to offer aid on the scale that's needed.

() But the stalemate in Burma, also known as Myanmar, shows how difficult it is to translate "**responsibility to protect**" into action. It's hard to imagine a government more deserving of losing the national equivalent of its parental rights; yet it seems more likely that hundreds of thousands of people will die needlessly than that the United Nations will act.

Dr. Chris Beyrer, an epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, has spent years in and around Burma, fighting the intransigence of the regime to help the Burmese people. What he has learned, as he said last week, is that "the regime does not have the interest of the people as its fundamental concern." Almost all its actions before the storm and since can be understood in this light: The junta cares about its own survival, not the survival of its people.

So even before the devastating storm swept in around midnight May 2, the Burmese were vulnerable. One-third of children under 5 were undernourished. With 3 percent of government spending going to public health, compared with 40 percent to the military, there was a dearth of doctors and clinics. In many areas malaria and tuberculosis posed severe threats.

The government failed to warn people of the approaching storm and has failed to help them since. It apparently does not want to risk whatever benefit might redound to Western countries for deploying the "soft power" of assistance. Saturday it deployed its army northward, to beat and browbeat people to vote yes in a phony referendum intended to make military rule permanent, rather than southward, where 1.5 million people were homeless and 65 percent of

territory was under water.

Yet when France reminded the United Nations of its "**responsibility to protect**," China, Russia and their ever-reliable voting partner, Thabo Mbeki's South Africa, slammed the door. So tons of aid float just offshore as Burma's generals sleep comfortably in their remote jungle capital and China's rulers can proudly, once again, take credit for defending the principle of national sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the Burmese people themselves do not give up. Small teams of aid workers from persecuted dissident groups are making their way south, offering what little assistance they can, though soldiers at times confiscate their goods. And in the delta, one Burmese managed to inform a friend outside, "many people keep looking up to the sky -- literally." Ten days after the cyclone, they are waiting for helicopters, which for many will appear too late or not at all.

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