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[The context of these two tragedies in China and Burma], the differing ways they have been handled by their respective authoritarian governments, is worth pondering. ()

() This has led to an important debate in foreign policy circles: Is the behavior of Myanmar's generals so irresponsible that it justifies the use of force to save its citizens? And did the existence of this threat help the U.N. chief prize open Myanmar's borders to aid workers?

() Put simply, does a decision to forgo international assistance, and by extension condemn thousands to die, amount to a crime against humanity? Judged by Western standards, preventing all possible aid is criminal. But the relevant standards here are Asian, remember, then international, and only after that, Western. The debate rages against a backdrop of a relatively new United Nations doctrine known as "the **Responsibility to Protect**."

(...) But protect [people] from what? This is the crux of the debate. Currently, **R2P** is understood by most to apply primarily in cases involving genocide or organized violence. Ramesh Thakur, a vice rector at the United Nations University in Tokyo and a member of the U.N. panel that drew up **R2P**, says a specific reference to natural disasters was removed because of the objections of some member states when the doctrine was promulgated in 2005.

To many, with thousands of lives at stake, this sounds mealy-mouthed. Both the United States and France have ships capable of mounting rescue operations stationed off the Myanmar coastline. But entreaties to the generals were, until this week, rebuffed, leading French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner to demand the U.N. invoke **R2P** to authorize airdrops. Even now, the ability of experienced Western aid workers to operate inside the cyclone zone remains in question.

() Intervening on principle, then, is not the current template: As Myanmar's generals have proven, help requires an invitation. ()

Still, perhaps what the outside world may be able to hope for in Myanmar's suffering is a reevaluation of **R2P** to include nations overwhelmed by nature. Even today, convincing many countries once ruled by the "civilizing white man" to allow that kind of access may prove impossible. ()

For more information, please refer to:

http://www.cfr.org/publication/16340/two_tragedies_two_responses.html?breadcrumb=/publication/by_type/op_ed