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Once again, the world is faced with the serious question of how far the international community should go in challenging the right of national sovereignty when a government denies its most basic **responsibility to protect** citizens faced with mass suffering and loss of life during a humanitarian catastrophe.

There has been a long litany of tragic cases where violence and killing have been directed against innocent people whose governments have stood by or were themselves the perpetrators. Think of the killing fields of Rwanda, the Balkans, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Darfur. And now, another example of a national government committing a major travesty of justice, but with a different twist.

The cyclone that has recently ravaged Burma (Myanmar), resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of people, has rightfully prompted widespread global calls to relieve the plight of the survivors and for immediate international action to forestall the threat of further agony and death due to the spread of disease and starvation.

Yet the governing dictatorship in Burma is bizarrely thwarting the kind of comprehensive humanitarian assistance needed to give relief and hope to its own people.

In response to this appalling performance of Burma's military junta in impeding the timely arrival and distribution of life-saving aid, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner rightly called on the UN Security Council to use the principle of "**responsibility to protect**" (**R2P**) as the basis for a resolution to expedite relief efforts. Under this principle, when a national government refuses to protect its own people, the international community, under the auspices of the Security Council, must assume this role.

It is a principle that has been written into the basic framework of international standards. At the 2005 UN World Summit, world leaders declared that governments can no longer hide behind the narrow precepts of national sovereignty in the face of catastrophic human tragedy. This endorsement of **R2P** in a global declaration was groundbreaking because it recognized for the first time that there are limits to the UN Charter's prohibition of international interference in the "domestic jurisdiction" of a member state.

The **R2P** concept was given life in 2000 when Canada established the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. The commission's mandate evolved from the concept of human security, a touchstone of Canadian foreign policy in the 1990s that put the protection of people at the top of the global agenda. Human security became the focus for Canadian diplomacy during our tenure in the Security Council in 2000-01, and we took a leading role in having **R2P** enacted as a basic United Nations reform.

While much of our efforts centred on the threat to innocent people because of war, there was no doubt in our minds that human security applies to natural disasters and pandemics just as much

as it does to civil conflict and state-sanctioned violence.

R2P became a way of building a bridge between the sovereign state and the international community in meeting shared global human security threats. These threats, which transcend national boundaries, are proving difficult and intractable to address at present.

Some critics have expressed strong reservations about applying this important international standard in the present situation in Burma. They fear that it would result in military intervention or that it could raise the spectre of some form of new colonialism. They fail to understand that under **R2P**, military intervention is considered to be an absolute last resort. The **R2P** tool box contains a wide range of diplomatic, political and economic measures to pressure governments and to build their own capacity to fully exercise their **responsibility to protect** the people within their borders.

Surely, the fundamental message of **R2P** is that there is no moral difference between an innocent person being killed by machete or AK-47 and starving to death or dying in a cholera epidemic that could have been avoided by proper international response.

Burma is in need of more than just statements of indignation and lament from the international community over the scope and injustice of this tragedy. Governments such as Canada's, which previously championed the **R2P** agenda, must add their voices to the diplomatic effort to advance the concept and to provide urgently needed humanitarian relief for the cyclone victims.

There is a strong likelihood that using **R2P** as a call to action will put the onus on many countries -- including key members of the Security Council such as China and Russia -- to mobilize and focus the necessary political and economic pressures on the Burmese government to change its stance. It also can give the signal to humanitarian aid groups and governments alike to find creative ways of working together to alleviate the suffering by means such as military drops and the establishment of security zones for those displaced by the tragedy.

The failure of the international community to take effective action in places like Darfur and the Congo reminds us that the **R2P** concept is in need of those who will support and advance it. The application of **R2P** to the situation in Burma would be a strong demonstration, especially to Asian countries, of the importance and viability of this international norm.

As the British historian Sir Martin Gilbert has said:

"Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, non-interference in the internal policies even of the most repressive governments was the golden rule of international diplomacy. The Canadian-sponsored concept of '**responsibility to protect**' proposed the most significant adjustment to national sovereignty in 360 years. It declared that for a country's sovereignty to be respected, it must demonstrate responsibility toward its own citizens."

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minister from 1996 to 2000.

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