

Alexander Noyes  
9 January 2009

*Alexander Noyes is a researcher at the Council on Foreign Relations Center for Preventative Action.*

THE TRAGIC cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe may prove to have a silver lining. For nearly a decade, Zimbabwe has been growing increasingly desperate, but international response to the crisis has been dilatory and wholly ineffective. In the last few weeks, however, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addressed the Security Council regarding Zimbabwe, and the United States and Britain announced they would no longer support any power-sharing agreement that left Robert Mugabe as president. The cholera epidemic provides the international community with an opportunity to act and protect the citizens of Zimbabwe. () If there were any lingering doubts about the utter failure of Mugabe's rule, the spread of cholera has again displayed him to be unable to fulfill the most basic precept of government: the **responsibility to protect**

its citizens. The UN General Assembly and the Security Council have endorsed the **responsibility-to-protect**

doctrine, deciding that if a state lacks the capacity or will to protect its people from mass atrocities then it is the responsibility of the international community to do so. The international community - led by the United Nations with strong South African and US support - must step into the leadership vacuum in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe is fast becoming a failing state, yet the international community's response remains tepid. The Southern African Development Community's mediation effort, led by former South African president Thabo Mbeki, is widely considered a disappointment, with Mbeki refusing to condemn Mugabe's most egregious actions. Mbeki has insisted on engaging in backroom "quiet diplomacy" and repeatedly discouraged international sanctions. The fruit of his efforts, the flawed September agreement, appears to have no chance of implementation. Yet Mbeki continues to lead the mediation. Clearly a new negotiation framework is needed.

Under the auspices of the UN, a prominent figure such as Kofi Annan should lead a renewed diplomatic effort to end the crisis. Annan played a critical role in the Kenya negotiations in early 2008, which are seen as a successful example of how the **responsibility-to-protect** norm can be implemented. With the promise of immunity and credible threats of serious measures from the UN Security Council, Mugabe and his associates could be convinced to step down peacefully. If they still refuse to give up power, coercive force should be carefully considered. Once Mugabe is out of the picture, a new negotiated transitional government should be put in place until internationally monitored elections can be held. The transitional government will require vigorous support from the international community, with the African Union, South Africa, and other SADC countries all playing essential roles.

Reports of the Security Council's recent closed-door session have been disheartening, as South Africa blocked the proposal of a nonbinding statement condemning Mugabe for his mishandling of the cholera epidemic. As more and more Zimbabwean refugees flow across their shared border, it is clear that South Africa's own interests, including its territorial integrity and capacity to protect its own citizens, are inextricably linked to ending the crisis in Zimbabwe. South Africa must recognize this and recalculate its stance. A robust response to the crisis in Zimbabwe is long overdue. The unfortunate cholera outbreak provides the international community with the

imperative to act. It must do so.  
Source: Unavailable