

Libya and the Responsibility to Protect

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New York Times

28 February 2011

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(...) In its statement condemning the violence, the Security Council included a critical reference to Libya's "responsibility to protect" (RtoP) its own citizens from mass atrocities. (...)

(...) Since then, the doctrine was most notably applied in the case of Kenya's post-election violence in 2007-2008. And this is only the second time it has been explicitly invoked by the Security Council regarding the situation in a specific country, the first being Darfur. (...)

(...) So the Libya resolution is a major step forward, both for the people of Libya and in the international community's stated commitment to end mass atrocities.

But lest we get too excited too early about what is happening in regard to Libya, it is important to understand these developments and how much more needs to be done.

First, the firm response to the situation in Libya has only been possible because of the combination of Qaddafi's horrific actions targeting civilians, his self-destructive comments demonstrating both his intent and disconnection from reality, and the mass defection of his ambassadors, military and civil servants in Libya and around the world.

Collectively, there is just no one left to defend him. Any resistance to tough action in the Security Council was reportedly overcome by a strong and unequivocal letter in support of the proposed resolution by Libya's permanent representative to the United Nations, who later broke down in tears begging the body to save his country.

Second, although the Security Council has taken stronger action in a shorter period of time than it ever has before on any other mass-atrocity situation, travel bans, financial sanctions and international criminal investigations won't have a demonstrable impact on civilians on the ground in the short-term. Qaddafi, his family and his regime are fighting for their lives, and these are far-off consequences that only begin to matter if they survive in power.

Third, while critical steps have been taken, more must be done to complete the transition of power and avoid the chaos and loss of life that would be caused if the world watches Libya descend into a full-blown civil war.

Specifically, by losing control of his territory, Qaddafi can legally be described as no longer being the leader of the country. (...)

(...) The situation in Libya is a test case for the Security Council and its implementation of the RtoP doctrine. Yet it remains the case that, as the U.N. secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, put it, "loss of time means more loss of lives." The Security Council must do more — and fast. It is our collective responsibility to ensure RtoP is an effective approach to protect people and human rights. (...)

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