

BBC

Viewpoint: 'Overwhelming' moral case for military path

8 March 2010 As calls for a UN-imposed no-fly zone over Libya gather support, Australian former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans - who has championed the doctrine that the international community has a responsibility to protect civilians - explains the moral case for such a move, in a BBC interview

Is there a clear-cut case for a "responsibility to protect" justification for intervention in Libya?

Gareth Evans: Absolutely, and that's been endorsed by the Security Council, which used that language and applied some quite serious coercive measures in terms of targeted sanctions, embargoes and references to the ICC - the International Criminal Court. The question now, of course, is whether a step further should be taken to go down the military path and I think, morally, the case is overwhelming. You just have to worry about military arguments, political arguments and legal arguments, that is three hurdles to cross before we can actually get there, which I think we need to do.

(...) Doesn't that make it too late now to use the responsibility to protect civilians justification?

GE: Not at all because we are facing escalation of this conflict that is still very one-sided in terms of the capacity of Gaddafi to do damage on the civilian population. I don't think there is any lack of moral clarity about this. There are real arguments about what would actually work best, whether it is a no-fly zone or support for people on the ground.

My own view is that a no-fly zone would be extremely effective in redressing the balance - the imbalance - we are seeing at the moment. To arm people on the ground runs the risk of escalating the conflict rather than levelling it down.

The real issues are political because the West certainly is not going to intervene unless they is some confidence that there are voices in Libya itself supporting this form of intervention, which seems to be increasing according to your own reports. (...)

You say the judgment is what works best. Surely the judgment should be what works, period? You had a no-fly zone in Iraq imposed over Southern Iraq and it didn't stop Saddam Hussein killing the Shia.

It didn't. But with the situation on the ground and with the way it is being characterised, and with quite a strong rebellion mounting on the ground, what you really need, to overcome the kind of catastrophic horror that Gaddafi has shown himself capable of inflicting, is some redressing of the manifest imbalance of those forces at the moment. The most obvious imbalance is the capacity to strike from the air, which is absolutely a challenge that is unable to be met on the other side.

A no-fly zone is not a soft option. It does involve probably taking out air defences, bombing runways and certainly taking out aircraft that breach it.

But it would make - at least according to the military analysts I've spoken to believe - a very serious difference and in a way it is the easiest way for the international community to contemplate because it does not involve boots on the ground, which of course we know from past experience can be very problematic.

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