

The UN has proved its worth in Libya and Ivory Coast The Independent Thomas Weiss
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The United Nations has demonstrated its utility in Libya and belatedly in the Ivory Coast.

The late American diplomat Richard Holbrooke quipped that blaming the UN for lousy performances was like blaming the hapless NY Knicks basketball team on their arena MadisonSquareGarden. Governments sometimes make quick use of the UN arena and demonstrate the political will to protect human beings, and sometimes they do not.

The installation of Mr Ouatarra and the surrender of Mr Gbagbo followed a half-year of dawdling as the disaster unfolded. Three times in March, the UN Security Council menaced the loser of the 2010 elections and repeated its authorisation to "use all necessary means to carry out its mandate to protect civilians". But UN soldiers did little until this week.

Gbagbo's intransigence and the unwillingness to apply significant armed force by UN peacekeepers facilitated the slow-moving train wreck. Was it necessary to enable war crimes and crimes against humanity, some one million refugees, and a ravaged economy?

Let's be clear: military force is not a panacea, and its use is not a cause for celebration. At the same time, the deployment of military force for human protection was largely absent from the international agenda until the action against Libya last month. Mustering the cross-cultural political will is never going to be easy, but Libya may be pivotal for the evolving norm of the responsibility to protect, agreed at the 2005 World Summit. (...)

(...)As the situations in Tripoli and elsewhere across the wider Middle East unfold, acute dilemmas for humanitarians and policymakers will remain. If the Libyan intervention goes well, it will put teeth in the fledgling responsibility to protect doctrine; and if the Libyan intervention goes badly, it will redouble international opposition and make future decisions more difficult. But for the moment, spoilers are on the defensive. (...)

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