

Never again let us fail our responsibility to protect Canberra Times Simon Adams 19 April 2011

The Armenian massacre began on the eve of Anzac Day.

A line of blood connects us to 1915. Anzac Day not only represents the most hallowed day in Australia's military history, it coincides with one of the most harrowing events of the 20th century. As the Allies readied themselves to storm Gallipoli, leading politicians within the Ottoman Empire were preparing to eliminate Armenian Christians, whom they considered treasonous vermin. (...)

(...)Regrettably, the reality of the second half of the 20th century is not how much we did to make "Never again" a reality, but how little. From the killing fields of Cambodia to East Timor, Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo, mass atrocity crimes were generally met with international diplomatic passivity. The United Nations proved incompetent or impotent in the face of monstrous human rights challenges.

Nor did the new millennium start much better. The barren wastelands of Darfur provided a fresh stain upon our collective conscience.

This is precisely why the recent international willingness to act with regard to Libya and the Ivory Coast is so remarkable. Gaddafi and his ilk were not preparing genocide, but they had shown a terrifying determination to bomb protestors and commit mass atrocities. The Libyan regime had additionally promised "no mercy" as its troops prepared to wipe out the opposition city of Benghazi. Meanwhile in the Ivory Coast, President Gbagbo's rejection of unfavourable election results, combined with his willingness to reignite civil war and to incite ethnic massacres, necessitated his removal. The Ivory Coast was in danger of developing into a slow motion re-run of Rwanda, with the world once again cast as passive spectator.

As imperfect as the UN Security Council's Libyan "No Fly Zone" and belated attempt to pull the Ivory Coast back from the brink are, they represent an important turning point. The new willingness to act, rather than just talk, in protection of people facing mass atrocities is not only due to leadership from Washington, London and Paris, or because of global hostility to Gaddafi or Gbagbo. The new willingness to act is partly because of an important shift in the world of ideas.

In 2001 an international committee developed the concept of "the

Responsibility to protect

" (or "

R2P

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R2P

is that all humans, regardless of where they live, have a right to be protected from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The

R2P

falls, first and foremost, upon a people's sovereign government. However, if that government proves unable or unwilling to exercise its responsibility, the world community is obliged to act.

R2P

was unanimously adopted at the UN's World Summit in 2005. Crucially,

R2P

formed the basis of the recent UN Security Council resolutions on Libya and the Ivory Coast. It was also invoked by President Obama, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Kevin Rudd and others in support of action in Libya and the Ivory Coast.

Genocide does not begin with gas chambers and mass graves. It develops incrementally - through hate campaigns, arrest and deportation, and incitement to massacre. Central to

R2P

is the idea that never again can a Rwanda or Srebrenica be allowed to occur as the world community sits on its hands. The

Responsibility to protect

demands an end to amnesia, impunity and inaction. (...)

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