

Deputy Secretary-General's remarks at General Assembly Thematic Panel Discussion on "From Commitment to Implementation: Ten Years of the Responsibility to Protect" [as delivered]

26 February 2016

I thank the President of the General Assembly for convening this important meeting to mark the start of the second decade of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

I am glad to see so many friends and colleagues involved and interested in the concept of the Responsibility to Protect. I particularly want to salute former FM Gareth Evans for his ground-breaking work to make R2P a norm and political reality. I also warmly welcome Navi Pillay and Edward Luck, like Gareth close friends and great champions of human rights and R2P. You have a great panel discussion to look forward to.

Ten years after the adoption of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, it is essential that we review what has been achieved and what remains to be done.

Ten years ago, Member States identified the need to bridge the gap between legal commitments to protect populations from genocide and crimes against humanity, and the continuing failures of protection on the ground.

As President of the General Assembly at the time, I well remember those discussions.

The solemn commitment that gave birth to the responsibility to protect was not designed to be a comfortable rhetorical restatement of common values.

It was a call to move away from the status quo.

It was a call to action.

So, ten years on, where do we stand?

Have we moved from commitment to delivery?

Not much, I would say, not sufficient. Looking around the world, we see a number of situations in which populations are suffering horrendous abuses. Some of them may well constitute genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

Individual states and the international community continue to fail in their responsibility to protect.

Too often, there is no responsibility. Too often there is no protection.

The damage to societies, to future generations – and to the reputation of the United Nations and its values -- is far-reaching and long-lasting.

We know all of this too well, and we have known it far too long.

Let me talk plainly.

I am appalled at the alarming disregard for international human rights and humanitarian law that we are seeing in this second decade of the 21st century.

Impunity is pervasive. Accountability is distant.

Too many Member States are failing to live up to fundamental rules of international humanitarian and human rights law.

And too many have yet to become Parties to the international conventions which set out the framework for preventing and punishing the crimes identified by the principle of the responsibility to protect.

Now, despite this sombre introduction, I want to register some progress.

The responsibility to protect has helped to generate a growing political understanding among Member States on how to prevent and respond to atrocity crimes.

Through successive General Assembly dialogues since 2009, Member States have agreed that prevention is at the core of the UN agenda. Our international action should employ the full range of diplomatic, political and humanitarian measures. Such action must take place in accordance with the United Nations Charter.

Discussions on the responsibility to protect in other United Nations inter-governmental fora have replicated these points.

The conceptual, political and institutional development of the R2P constitutes constant work in progress.

The responsibility to protect has also led to the development of new political commitment and new institutional capacities. We see it in other international and regional organizations. We also see it in international networks for the prevention of atrocity crimes.

Let us list some of them because it is pretty impressive. The Global R2P Focal Point Network, the Regional Committee at the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region, the Latin American Network on Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention, and the Global Action against Mass Atrocity Crimes – all are actively enhancing our understanding of risk factors and sources of national resilience.

They all aim to prevent a downward spiral towards systematic violence. They help identify ways to assist States to better protect their populations.

The measure of our success is the extent to which we have been able to prevent atrocity crimes or the escalation of such crimes.

The last decade has seen mixed results.

Developments in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Kenya count as successes.

But our collective response to the Syrian crisis has been a catastrophic failure. And the situation in South Sudan is deeply troubling.

Other crisis areas are still the subject of debate.

Measuring the impact of preventive action is difficult.

Special Advisers Adama Dieng and Jennifer Welsh are launching a research project this year which is to draw conclusions about the combination of tools likely to make the most difference in protecting populations at risk.

The results of this research based on a number of case studies can guide us in developing and employing the different instruments we have at our disposal.

Let me here commend and thank Adama and Jennifer for their close and effective cooperation and for their excellent contribution to our work.

I see three priorities for building on what we have achieved.

First, we must do better at prevention.

That means a genuine and wider political commitment to early action from all sides. We must act early instead of waiting for disaster to occur.

Internally, within the United Nations system, our Human Rights Up Front initiative is an important step in this direction. But it is crucial that our alerts and warnings land on fertile ground.

Second, when crimes against humanity occur, we need to respond faster and more decisively. The evidence that we are not doing enough is painfully clear.

It should spur us all to do more in the enlightened self-interest of all concerned. There is a common interest in avoiding disasters occurring and needing to launch peacekeeping operations when all know we should have done more at the preventive stage.

Third, we should do more in peacebuilding – financially and politically.

When rebuilding is not done or fails, the risk of recurrence grows and gains as we have seen can be quickly and tragically reversed – just look at South Sudan.

In such cases, we must maintain our engagement and learn from our past failures.

The Secretary-General has spoken of the need to instill a ‘culture of courage’ to ensure that respect for human rights and international humanitarian law does not succumb to other considerations.

At the beginning of the second decade of the responsibility to protect, it is imperative that the international community unequivocally reaffirms the responsibility to protect of 2005.

We must work collectively to make the protection from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity a living reality.

This is an obligation to humanity and to the people we are to serve in the spirit of the Charter.

Thank you.