

Media Release

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Civil Society groups welcome governments' commitment to prevent and end mass atrocities

The long-awaited General Assembly plenary debate on the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) confirmed overwhelming government support for the historic norm approved at the September 2005 UN Summit. Government after government committed to improving international efforts to prevent and halt genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

“Predictions by the General Assembly President and international media that the debate would reopen and weaken the Responsibility to Protect have proved inaccurate. The new peace tool is likely to be strengthened by the General Assembly’s deliberation,” said William Pace, Executive Director of WFM-Institute for Global Policy, host of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP).

Sixty governments addressed the General Assembly on Thursday, July 23 and Friday, July 24, reacting to a report by the Secretary-General that clarified the meaning of governments’ commitment to the Responsibility to Protect at the World Summit in 2005 and recommended next steps to implement this commitment to preventing and halting mass atrocities. Almost twice as many governments as expected signed up to make statements, prompting the UN to extend the debate. The debate is expected to finish tomorrow, Tuesday July 28, 2009.

Strong supporting statements were heard from governments in every region, including Guatemala, Costa Rica, South Korea, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Guinea-Bissau, Rwanda, the European Union, France, Norway, Hungary, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Ireland, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Many voiced support for the “three pillars, four crimes” formation articulated in the Secretary General’s report as well as the need to focus on prevention and early warning measures.

Despite the efforts of General Assembly President Miguel D’Escoto and a few government detractors, such as Cuba, Pakistan and Venezuela, to derail the debate, the exchange between governments is viewed by observers as an important step in building greater support for implementing RtoP. The opponents’ attempt to equate the Responsibility to Protect with the discredited concept of humanitarian intervention was soundly rejected, as was the idea that RtoP is an imperialist concept only supported by the West.

Many governments linked their support for RtoP to the need for significant improvements in the Security Council, and in strengthening states and the UN’s capacities for prevention mass atrocity crimes. Even countries who have expressed concerns in the past, such as Indonesia,

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Brazil, India, Algeria, China, Ecuador and the Philippines, delivered constructive statements during the debate.

Several states raised legitimate concerns about the application of the norm, including that the norm may be used selectively by powerful states, that it should be restricted to the four crimes and violations (genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing), and that the Permanent Five Members of the Security Council should refrain from using the veto. Many statements also included practical examples of how governments are already working at the national and regional levels to ensure for the protection of populations from the four crimes and violations and a desire to improve upon such mechanisms.

The International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect welcomes this overwhelmingly positive response to the Secretary-General's report entitled "Implementing the Responsibility to Protect". On Friday 24 July 2009, Ms. Thelma Ekiyor, Executive Director of the West Africa Civil Society Institute and Chair of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, said "The focus of government statements in this debate is a great success for many civil society groups who have been working to ensure that we move forward and not backward on turning the Responsibility to Protect from words to deeds".

Note to press:

*The **INTERNATIONAL COALITION FOR THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT (ICRtoP)** is a group of 16 NGOs from all regions of the world working to strengthen normative consensus for RtoP, further the understanding of the norm, push for strengthened capacities to prevent and halt genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and mobilize NGOs to push for action to save lives in RtoP country-specific situations.*

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