



22 July 2009

**Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay,  
on the Importance of the Responsibility to Protect in Saving Lives**

NEW YORK – “This week an extremely important discussion is going on within the United Nations about the concept of the responsibility to protect – the responsibility of governments to protect people facing imminent or ongoing violence that might lead to genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity or ethnic cleansing.

For most people, it goes without saying that governments have a responsibility to prevent these major human rights violations. Indeed, this responsibility is clearly established in international human rights and humanitarian law.

However, it is evident that governments, and the United Nations, have not been very successful in preventing them from happening during the last 60 years. We all know about the terrible events in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia that occurred in front of our eyes while the international community seemed impotent to stop them, let alone prevent them.

The world is not indifferent to these atrocities. Nor are the world’s leaders, who in 2005 reconfirmed their responsibility to protect. What the world is today grappling with is how to translate this consensus into reality.

It is not easy for the international community to respond in a situation where genocide, war crimes or other serious human rights violations are occurring. I witnessed this myself growing up in South Africa as a victim of apartheid, a crime against humanity. It was many years before the measures of the international community had the desired impact on the then government of South Africa and the legalized system of discrimination and injustice that was apartheid, ended.

My Office will continue to support the ability of States to fulfill their responsibility to protect through long-term measures such as institution building and technical cooperation to promote respect for human rights and to prevent and address human rights violations. However, a concerted effort by States, UN partners and regional organizations will be required to develop and maintain a credible capacity for rapid responses to exceptional situations similar to those of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Concerted efforts by the international community at critical moments in

time could prevent the escalation of violence into genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity or ethnic cleansing.

The responsibility to protect offers us an opportunity to prepare our future response to those situations the United Nations was created to prevent. We should all undertake an honest assessment of our ability to save lives in extraordinary situations. I hope the discussion of the General Assembly will concentrate on this common interest of all Member States and will encourage some concrete future steps in this critical direction.”

ENDS

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