

Remarks at the UN General Assembly Interactive Dialogue on the Responsibility to Protect

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New York City
September 6, 2016

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Thank you, Assistant Secretary-General Šimonović, for your leadership on this critical issue.

At the United Nations we enshrine R2P in resolutions and give it pride of place at meetings like this. But institutionalization is meaningful only if leaders make it a priority. Rhetoric means little if we fail to achieve action in practice.

Just last month, we were all haunted by the image of the young Syrian Omran Daqneesh as he stoically wiped blood from his bleeding scalp onto the seat of an ambulance. He survived the collapse of his apartment building in Aleppo, but he still faces the horrifying prospect of more airstrikes from Russian and Syrian planes. Omran is a symbol of how politics, sectarianism, and military gain continue in many places to get the better of R2P.

South Sudan – from which the Security Council returned from a trip just this morning – also presents a searing picture. It was a summer of awful violence against civilians in Juba, with hundreds of cases of sexual violence in July alone. As the Secretary-General wrote in his devastating letter to the Security Council on South Sudan on August 10, it was outrageous that the national security personnel charged with the protection of the civilian population were often the very ones killing and raping them.

Then there is North Korea, where the UN Human Rights Council's commission of inquiry determined that "crimes against humanity have been committed...pursuant to policies established at the highest levels of the state." The Security Council met to discuss the situation last December, and we hope to do so again this year – but meeting is not enough. We also hope this year's resolution in the Third Committee maintains the strong focus on exposing North Korea's egregious human rights record, particularly abuses in the prison camp system.

These crises are obviously beyond awful – and they lead me to a point I want to make about accountability. When we talk about accountability, there are really two kinds: First,

there is political reconciliation amidst honesty about what actually happened when atrocities were committed. Second, there is legal accountability for individuals – for perpetrators. Honesty about the past still eludes us in some cases. Just over a year ago, a Security Council member vetoed a resolution condemning the Srebrenica massacre as a “crime of genocide.” As we said at the time, it was a veto of a “well-established fact,” and it did nothing to ease divisions in the Balkans. As for accountability, there are profound practical challenges. Plans for a hybrid court for South Sudan have been publicly undercut by the country’s divided leaders. It has been more than a year since the then-president of Central African Republic promulgated a law to create a hybrid court in that county – but it is still not a reality. While national will for the court has been evident, international support has lagged. Let us begin to match our rhetoric with resources.

We recognize the importance of joint action, of commitments that enjoy the unanimous support of the international system. Every country has an active role to play, and the United States has taken steps in recent years to strengthen our own commitment to R2P. We have increased our focus on early warning assessment. We have established the Atrocities Prevention Board to ensure that genocide and mass atrocity prevention remain a priority at the highest levels of our government.

We will continue to take such steps – though we recognize we have a long road ahead. Omran Daqneesh still faces airstrikes and Aleppo must contend with complete besiegement. South Sudanese women still face the risk of sexual violence from their supposed protectors. And citizens of North Korea continue to be starved by their own government. The road ahead is not easy by any means, but we look forward to working with every Member State in this organization to prevent atrocities and related violence in line with the commitments we have all made and affirm here today, consistent with the responsibility to protect.

Thank you.