United Nations General Assembly holds sixth informal, interactive dialogue on the Responsibility to Protect, focusing on collective responsibility and international assistance

On 8 September 2014, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) held its sixth annual informal, interactive dialogue on the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP, R2P) at the United Nations headquarters in New York. The dialogue followed the release of the UN Secretary-General’s (UNSG) sixth report on RtoP, entitled “Fulfilling our Collective Responsibility: International Assistance and the Responsibility to Protect” (A/68/947). The report explored the second pillar of the RtoP norm, which states that the international community has a responsibility to assist other states to protect their populations. In his 2014 report, the Secretary-General explored the various forms of assistance as well as the different partnerships that could be established to fulfill Pillar II and thus strengthen overall implementation of RtoP. (To read the ICRtoP’s summary of the report, click here.)

Overview of the panel of experts:

The dialogue began with opening remarks from the Office of the President of the General Assembly (PGA) and the UNSG Ban Ki-Moon. The UNSG acknowledged that the Responsibility to Protect commitment, in which states agreed to counter atrocity crimes with resolve, was being “severely tested” by crises in South Sudan, Syria, Central African Republic, Nigeria, and elsewhere. Earlier action, including through the provision of assistance to states under Pillar II, would both protect at-risk populations and reduce the need for costly and controversial interventions under Pillar III. Ban further exhorted states to join him in upholding their RtoP commitments, underscoring that “turning a blind eye to these acts is no longer tenable.”

The Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, Mr. Adama Dieng, then moderated a panel of experts that included the Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson; Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, former Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); Jean Ping, former Chair of the African Union (AU) Commission; and Dr. Jennifer Welsh, UN Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect. Mr. Eliasson highlighted that the world knows that assistance works in preventing or responding to atrocities, citing the examples of Kenya and Cote d’Ivoire. He stated that rhetoric has too often outpaced action when it comes to atrocity prevention, declaring that “the lives of millions and the credibility of this organization hinge on us doing better.” Dr. Pitsuwan encouraged states to take a more proactive stance in mainstreaming RtoP while noting the beneficial positioning of regional organizations in translating global commitments into principles, policies, and action on the ground. Jean Ping echoed the value of regional ownership of crises, joining Mr. Eliasson in mentioning the successful 2008 mediation by the AU of the post-electoral crisis in Kenya. Finally, Dr. Welsh described further the findings of the UNSG report, while calling on the UNGA
to craft an agenda for the implementation of RtoP over the next decade.

Informal, interactive dialogue on RtoP

Following the panel of experts, sixty-seven member states gave interventions on behalf of eighty-three governments. In addition, one regional organization and four civil society organizations, including the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, as well as three ICRtoP members, delivered statements.

Rwanda began by making a statement on behalf of the 45 Member States belonging to the Group of Friends of the Responsibility to Protect. The statement, which was the first of its kind delivered on behalf of the grouping, reaffirmed the Group of Friends’ support for the work of the UN Joint Office on the Prevention of Genocide and RtoP, while also reiterating “our common understanding that RtoP reinforces, rather than alters or undermines, state sovereignty, and that RtoP is indeed a preventive commitment at its core.” This emphasis on prevention proved to be a common theme throughout the day, with the European Union, Costa Rica, Latvia, Indonesia, Armenia, China, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Luxembourg, and many others stressing that prevention remains the cornerstone of the RtoP norm. In particular, states such as Cote d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone highlighted the important role of civil society in prevention, who can “sound the alarm bells” and work to promote peace.

Another recurrent theme was the overwhelming support by Member States for the report’s inclusion of the “national ownership” principle and acknowledgement of the role of regional and sub-regional organizations. New Zealand, Pakistan, Thailand, Argentina, Cote d’Ivoire, Uruguay, and Nigeria all highlighted the need for greater cooperation with regional organizations, who understand clearly the realities on the ground and are poised to take timely action. Nigeria noted its determination to work in partnership with other Member States to ensure effective RtoP implementation, while also calling for more international support for the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Several state interventions focused on how international assistance in related thematic areas, such as disarmament and women, peace and security, could strengthen implementation of Pillar II. For example, Ecuador, New Zealand, Finland, Montenegro, Burundi, and Sierra Leone warned that countering the arms trade would be essential in order to deny perpetrators the

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means necessary to commit atrocities, with several of these states endorsing the Arms Trade Treaty in this regard. Others, including the UK, Germany, Italy, Finland, Canada, Norway, and Namibia, underlined the importance of including women’s perspectives in the implementation of RtoP.

Thailand concurred, articulating that women can play a crucial role in conflict prevention and management, urging states to “focus more on women’s empowerment.” Thailand noted that UN Women’s training program to Thai female police cadets was an important contribution to its ability to build capacity among women.

**Questions Remain on RtoP for a Small Number of States**

A small number of states, such as Cuba, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Egypt, and Bolivia, continued to express their concern with the implementation of RtoP. Many of these countries noted their apprehension that the norm could be used to justify military intervention and some opined that the three pillars should be implemented in a sequential manner. The vast majority of states who participated in the dialogue, however, reaffirmed their belief that the pillars were non-sequential and mutually reinforcing, as outlined in the 2009 report of the Secretary-General, while reminding those gathered that military force under RtoP is only a tool of last resort and must be authorized by the UN Security Council.

**States discuss next steps for RtoP Implementation**

As the ten-year anniversary of the adoption of the RtoP norm in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document is approaching, several states, such as Spain and Italy, suggested that the international community take stock of the successes and challenges of RtoP. Fourteen states identified the use of the veto by Permanent Members of the Security Council as a major hurdle in implementation of RtoP. These same countries exhorted these members to adopt a voluntary restraint on the use of the veto when mass atrocities arise on the Council’s agenda. A high number of states (Czech Republic, Chile, Finland, Hungary, Denmark, Luxembourg, France, Uruguay, Republic of Korea, Slovenia, and Georgia) encouraged the UNGA to consider including RtoP on its formal agenda, which could show the GA’s enduring commitment to the norm.

**Four civil society organizations participate in dialogue**

Following Member State interventions, the floor was given to civil society to participate in the discussions on RtoP. Four civil society organizations – the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, the Global Centre for R2P, the Asia-Pacific Centre for R2P, and the World Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy-spoke. A point raised amongst all groups was the continued challenges facing the international community to prevent and respond to
ICRtoP’s Summary of the General Assembly’s sixth informal, interactive dialogue on RtoP

atrocities as evidenced by the crises in Syria, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan, among others. The International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP) used the opportunity to highlight the important role of civil society in implementing pillar two, as such actors are “already providing all three main forms of assistance, with the goal of building inclusive, resilient and transparent societies”. Both the Asia-Pacific Centre on R2P and the ICRtoP identified the urgent need to shift the discourse on RtoP from primarily focusing on women as victims of atrocity crimes to include a holistic approach that recognizes and empowers women as agents of protection. Further highlighting the need to deny actors the means to commit atrocities, the Asia-Pacific Centre advocated for States to ratify and implement the Arms Trade Treaty as a means to uphold their RtoP.

Civil society also reflected on actions undertaken within the UN system, and raised points on next steps for RtoP’s advancement. The ICRtoP and the World-Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy expressed support for the suggestion included within the Secretary-General’s report, urging States to consider formalizing RtoP onto the agenda of the General Assembly. Additionally, The ICRtoP, World Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy, and Global Centre for R2P made a strong appeal for the restraint of the use of the veto in situations where populations are threatened by RtoP crimes. In discussing additional steps that Member States can undertake to strengthen their capacity to uphold RtoP as well as assist other states, the Global Centre for R2P emphasized the important work of the Global Network of R2P Focal Points, which now includes 41 governments who have appointed senior level officials to oversee RtoP’s advancement domestically.

Office of the President of the General Assembly

Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon

Deputy Secretary-General Mr. Jan Eliasson

Dr. Surin Pitsuwan

Mr. Jean Ping

Dr. Jennifer Welsh

States

European Union

Estonia
(on behalf of Latvia and Lithuania)
Rwanda
(on behalf of the Group of Friends of RtoP)

Pakistan

United States

Netherlands

United Kingdom

Republic of Korea

Ecuador

Venezuela

Qatar

Liechtenstein

Costa Rica
(Spanish)

Iran

Switzerland
(English and French)

Russia
(Russian and English)

Mexico
(Spanish)

China

Brazil

Uruguay

Paraguay
Chile

France
(French and English)

Cuba
(Spanish)

Luxembourg
(French)

India

Denmark

New Zealand

Belarus

Guatemala

Malaysia

Turkey

Australia

Indonesia

Germany

Italy

Thailand

Hungary

Finland

Canada
(in English and French)

Botswana
Philippines

Armenia

Norway

Egypt

Ukraine

Belgium

Israel

Slovenia

Côte d'Ivoire
(French)

Czech Republic

Nigeria

Romania

Syria

Albania

Spain
(Spanish)

Peru

Morocco

Namibia

Georgia

Argentina

Myanmar

Montenegro
Burundi
(French)

Azerbaijan

Bolivia

Sierra Leone

Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

Civil Society

Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect

Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

World Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy