

Speech: Activating Human Protection in Situations of Crisis

Mr. Adama Dieng, UN Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide
May 2013

Speech delivered at the Lysøen Revisited Conference, Bergen, Norway.

(...)The Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes it clear that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security. Consequently, it is the primary duty of each state to protect its people and ensure that they live in peace and security. The key question underlying my presentation is how precisely the international community can activate its role to protect civilians when crisis or conflict erupts, especially when it is evident that the state is either unwilling or unable to fulfil this foremost responsibility? (...)

R2P is an evolving concept that addresses the failure of states, whether unwilling or unable, to protect their populations. What is novel about R2P is that it challenges the primacy of state sovereignty by shifting focus from the rights of states toward the rights of their populations. (...)

The protection of civilians in times of crisis requires full respect for the rights of individuals and the obligations of relevant actors to act in accordance with international human rights principles. The objective should be to relieve human suffering by helping reduce exposure to threats and by helping populations to recover from the effects of violence. This aspect is critical, because how we respond to atrocity crimes determines our future preventive capabilities.

There is a need for greater coordination between the United Nations, Member States and civil society to determine the fault lines that fuel conflict. It is only through understanding and piecing together critical information on the major causes of conflict that we can adequately prevent conflict and protect populations, including from the most serious of situations, where they are at risk of atrocity crimes, which usually occur in the context of armed conflict.

An important element of prevention is early warning. States, regional organizations and the United Nations can all contribute to early warning and should establish effective early warning mechanisms that will prompt all actors to respond to situations before they escalate into crises. The responsibility to protect civilians lies not just with the warring parties to a conflict but with all of us, and at all time, whether as individuals, States, regional organizations, the United Nations, or civil society.

Modern technology can be used for both early warning and documentation purposes. Satellite imagery can be used in particular to gather information about incidents of concern and track individuals or groups suspected of committing serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law. (...)

Activating human protection in situations of crisis requires coordinated but unequivocal message to parties involved in a conflict that violence of any kind against civilians is unacceptable. Those who instigate, support or indeed bankroll such violence will be punished. As argued by the Secretary General, we are moving decisively towards a new age of sovereignty as responsibility. An era in which those who commit atrocities and violate the

human rights of their people will be held to account. (...)

To enhance the future capacity of the United Nations to adequately prevent and respond to mass atrocities, it is essential that there is a closer coordination between international actors and regional organizations. This cooperation is crucial given the proximity of the latter organizations to the potential areas where atrocities may be committed and their growing role in addressing regional crises. It is therefore critical that the existing partnership between the United Nations and regional organizations is enhanced to ensure that in the event of potential atrocities, there is a clear international and regional cooperation. A good example in this regard can be seen in the cooperation between the United Nations and the African Union in Mali, where the United Nations has been guided by the AU in the provision of support to Mali.

In conclusion, let me reiterate my strong belief that R2P and the three Pillars that underpin it remains the ideal framework within which we can appropriately respond to mass atrocities and enhance protection of civilians in times of crisis. While it is evident that the concept challenges traditional notion of state sovereignty, in my view the concept enhances its value by reaffirming the fundamental role of the state to protect its own people. Even when the state is not in position to do so, still the concept recognizes its sovereign right to seek international support to enhance its capability to protect its people. Similarly, the United Nations, through the Security Council and within the framework of the Charter, will continue to play its historical role by providing a necessary platform of legitimacy and leadership if the authorisation of coercive measures is required to lessen human suffering and save lives, in the most serious of cases. However, to achieve this objective, the Security Council must act with unity and provide moral and political leadership. The world is listening to the messages coming from the Council and its current inaction in the face of the tragedies occurring every day in Syria is a blow to those who took up the call of “never again”. The Council Members must set aside their differences and use the pre-eminent role of the Council as an arbiter of peace and security to prevent further atrocities and save lives. (...)

Read [full speech.](#)