

Responsibility of States for Atrocity Crimes Prevention

In the interdependent and globalized world in which we live, atrocity crimes have extremely serious regional and international implications that extend well beyond the immediate victims and their families. The massive flows of refugees and internally displaced persons generated by atrocity crimes create enormous humanitarian and protection needs and put considerable pressure on host communities and governments. The human and financial costs associated with intervention once atrocities are committed are high and the prospects and consequences always uncertain. We spend far more time and resources responding to crises rather than preventing them. It is becoming obvious that we need to shift our focus on more effective prevention of atrocity crimes.

Some efforts have already been invested in this regard. States recognized the imperative to prevent atrocity crimes when they adopted the principle of the responsibility to protect at the 2005 World Summit. Heads of State and Government unanimously affirmed their primary responsibility to protect their own populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and accepted a collective responsibility to assist each other in fulfilling this responsibility. They also declared their preparedness to take timely and decisive action, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and in cooperation with relevant regional organizations as appropriate, when national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations. The international community's commitment to responsibility to protect has grown significantly and has been reiterated many times since the 2005 World Summit. The Security Council has adopted over 50 resolutions that refer to the responsibility to protect. Support for the principle and the Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect has been expressed in stronger terms and with increasing frequency in recent years. The General Assembly has continued consideration of the principle, convened ten annual informal interactive dialogues and held two formal debates. The Human Rights Council has also adopted more than twenty resolutions that feature the responsibility to protect.

Despite described political and normative progress on the responsibility to protect, there is a need for a reality check: atrocity crimes have increased over the past few years. As they have, we have continued to focus primarily on responding to crises, rather than devoting the time, energy and resources needed to prevent them. Responsibility to protect did not fail; we have failed to implement it. A new approach is needed, one based on accountability. Strengthening accountability creates the impetus needed to galvanize those with the responsibility to protect into action.

This presentation focuses on the implementation of responsibility to protect through the adoption of measures to address accountability for the prevention of atrocity crimes. Accountability can be legal, moral and political in form and can operate horizontally between peers as well as vertically between national authorities and their populations. States, working individually and collectively, can considerably strengthen accountability for atrocity prevention. Additional steps to improve accountability should also be taken within the United Nations. Individually, these are relatively modest measures requiring relatively few new resources and making use of existing mechanisms and capacities. But implemented together, they may have the potential to significantly improve our capacity to prevent atrocities.