

International community must remain committed to 'Responsibility to Protect' principle – Ban

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Countries must remain committed to protecting populations from mass atrocities, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told an informal dialogue in the General Assembly today, stressing this does not only entail acting in the face of violence, but also focusing on conflict prevention.

“Let us [...] remember that the responsibility to protect seeks not only to protect populations at the eleventh hour but, first and foremost, to prevent crises from erupting at all,” Mr. Ban said in his remarks at to the General Assembly’s Informal Interactive Dialogue and panel discussion on “The Responsibility to protect: State Responsibility and Prevention.”

“Prevention may sound abstract, but it is very concrete and specific. It means, among many things, that States translate obligations and standards set out in international law, notably international humanitarian and human rights law, into policies, programmes, laws and institutions that protect and empower their people,” Mr. Ban said.

Sometimes known as ‘R2P,’ the principle of the responsibility to protect holds States responsible for shielding their own populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and related crimes against humanity and requires the international community to step in if this obligation is not met.

Mr. Ban noted that the concept of R2P arose out of the brutal legacy of the 20th century, including the Holocaust, the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and other large-scale tragedies that underlined the failure of individual States to live up to their protection

responsibilities.

He noted that his fifth report on R2P aims to provide analysis and strategies that can help States fulfil their responsibilities by building societies that “embrace diversity and where disputes are resolved amicably, under the rule of law.”

Mr. Ban also addressed the issue of the Syrian conflict, saying it illustrates the challenges that States continue to face, in spite of efforts by the international community to end the violence and push for a political solution.

“Many observers regard the international community’s divisions and immobility as a failure of the responsibility to protect. But this critique misses the mark. The concept itself is not to blame,” Mr. Ban said.

A number of protection measures have been put in place in response to atrocities and as a way to prevent further escalation, he said. These include the Commission of Inquiry established by the Human Rights Council, the imposition of sanctions and asset freezes by States or regional organizations, and the humanitarian assistance efforts of UN entities and our partners.

“These are all part of the responsibility to protect,” he said. “Notwithstanding these steps, and as I state in the report that is now before you, our collective failure to prevent atrocity crimes in Syria over the past two and a half years will remain a heavy burden on the standing of the United Nations and its Member States.”

Mr. Ban said he hoped that current discussions related to safeguarding Syria’s chemical weapon stocks will lead to the Security Council playing an effective role in promoting an end to the Syrian tragedy.

In his remarks, Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson underlined that States must acknowledge that atrocity crimes are processes, not single events, which requires conflict prevention to be a continuous endeavour.

“It starts with Member States taking decisive steps to fulfil their human rights obligations, and regional actors and international institutions to assist them in building societies based on the rule of law,” he said. “We pay an enormous price for waiting for conflicts to get worse.”

Mr. Eliasson added that the international community must strive to build a spirit of co-operation dedicated to atrocity prevention. This must be rooted in national efforts as well as in the work of regional and international organizations. “Everybody has a role to play. Nobody can do everything; and everybody can do something,” he concluded.

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