

Building a world community



The UN debates R2P – to what end? by Fergus Watt

On 25 June 2018 the UN General Assembly held a debate on "The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" as part of the formal agenda of its 72nd session.

This year's debate constituted the first formal discussion of R2P by the UN General Assembly since 2009. (In recent years the Assembly's consideration of R2P has taken the form of "interactive dialogues" – a succession of statements by member states and civil society experts.)

For over a decade the World Federalists have hosted a global civil society network, the International Network for the Responsibility to Protect (ICR2P). According to the R2P doctrine,

- (1) the State has the primary responsibility for the protection of populations within its territory from atrocity crimes such as genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.
- (2) the international community has a responsibility to assist States in fulfilling this responsibility.
- (3) the international community should use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means to protect populations from these crimes. And if a State fails to protect its populations or is in fact the perpetrator of crimes, the international community must be prepared to take stronger measures, including the collective use of force through the UN Security Council.

The application of R2P has sometimes generated controversy and criticism, for example in Libya when a civilian protection mandate was interpreted by western governments as a mandate for regime change, or through the failure by the Security Council to protect civilians in conflict (e.g. Syria, South Sudan, and elsewhere). However, misapplication or failed application of the norm should not diminish the utility and necessity of the R2P doctrine itself.

A report put forward in advance of the June 25 debate by Secretary-General Guterres focused on options to further improve early warning and assessment as well as a

three-fold strategy for strengthening early action, consistent with this SG's longstanding focus on strengthening preventive capacities.

However, despite this evident progress in acceptance of the R2P norm, there is a sense that, overall the Responsibility to Protect is languishing, too often ignored in a world of increasing violent conflict and decreasing cohesion on the part of the Security Council. As the Secretary-General noted in his report, "Despite progress in implementing the responsibility to protect principle, the international community continues to fall short where it matters most: preventing genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, and protecting vulnerable populations."

Ivan Simonovic, the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect authored a widely circulated article in March 2018 entitled "R2P at a Crossroads: Implementation, or Marginalization." Simonovic challenged member states in the General Assembly to be more proactive in asserting the R2P agenda, even when the Security Council is often unable to agree on measures to protect civilians and prevent or curtail atrocity crimes.

Let's hope his advice is acted upon.