Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

General Assembly debate on the responsibility to protect and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity

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Mr Chair, this debate is an opportunity for us to reaffirm our support for the principles of our Responsibility to Protect, as endorsed in the 2005 World Summit. Yet, despite this historic commitment, it is clear as we look across the world that we are failing in our responsibility. The UNHCR reports that armed conflict and persecution have led to 70.8 million people being forcibly displaced. Some member states in this United Nations not only failed to protect their people, they willingly harm them. So our adherence R2P has never been more important. We must continue to assert that states should protect; not harm their people. We should anticipate and diffuse conflicts before they begin and where atrocities occur: we should investigate and hold those responsible accountable. So, unlike some, we strongly support the inclusion of this item on the formal agenda of UNGA 2019. We also welcome the S-G's report and the valuable work being done by Special Advisors Adama Dieng and now Karen Smith.

Let's remind ourselves what our common undertakings are. Under Pillar 1, states must uphold their obligations under International Human Rights law, Humanitarian Law and Refugee Law. But there are too many examples of states that fail to do so because they are either unable - but more often - unwilling to meet their responsibilities. Some of those states have spoken here this morning. Tellingly, they dispute this concept of the Responsibility to Protect. They do so because its existence is a daily repudiation of their abuses against their own people.

In Venezuela, economic devastation, starvation and, malnutrition has resulted in the flights of over 3 million Venezuelans to neighbouring countries – the largest migration in Latin American history. In Myanmar, a culture of military impunity left the civilian government unable to prevent the mass exodus of 700,000 Rohingya refugees who have fled to Bangladesh since 2017. Primarily due to the actions of the Myanmar military. There are further 244,000 internally displaced within Myanmar. The atrocities against the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities constitute ethnic cleansing on an industrial scale. And they also may constitute genocide. And in Syria - who we heard from at length this morning - there the horrifying reports of attacks on schools, hospitals, and first responders and the use of barrel bombs in Idlib are chilling examples of the devastating effect on civilians when a state not only fails to uphold its Responsibility to Protect but actively breaches its obligations to do so.

Russia and the Assad regime must cease these attacks against the Syrian people, and respect their obligations under International Human Rights Law. But we must all, here, redouble our efforts to help those people whose own governments have abandoned them or actively persecuted them.

We should also do more as the Secretary- General's reform agenda urges us: to focus on the preventative capabilities within the Responsibility to Protect - the second pillar. We know that human rights violations and abuses if left unchecked can be both an indicator of, and a first step towards, mass atrocities. We welcome the Secretary-General's assessment that there needs to be a more systematic and structured approach across the UN system to information gathering, assessment of atrocity risks, and collective analysis so that member states can receive early recommendations for action and prevention. We agree with the Secretary-General that there should be greater use of the Human Rights Council and the Universal Periodic Review process to highlight human rights violations and abuses and to help states respond to them. And the UN Joint Office continues to play an essential role in mainstreaming R2P within the UN and on an international level. We welcome the appointment of Dr. Karen Smith as the new R2P Special Advisor and support her work in partnership with the Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide and bringing potential risks of atrocity crimes to the attention of the Security Council.

Mediation also has a key role: active preventative diplomacy and mediation can help prevent atrocities and reduce tensions and conflict. The UK has been a strong supporter of the strengthened UN mediation capacity. The UN Secretary-General recently reported that peacebuilding dividends in respect to Mali, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and South Sudan were all clearly visible from this work. We encourage states to be alert to the early signs of conflict, to engage with communities and civil society, and to make use of the Secretary-General's Good Offices and the UN mediation Support Unit.

And these peacebuilding processes and efforts to prevent conflict also need to be inclusive and diverse. We know that women continue to build peace when formal processes fail. They lobby for peace processes to begin when parties refuse to talk, and implement peace agreements long after international donors have left. We want to see the UN through support from the international community increase the number of female Special Envoys nominated by the Secretary-General and increase both the number of women nominated for the mediation standby unit and the number of female candidates selected.

Finally, onto the third pillar: accountability and ending impunity. It is vital for deterring the recurrence of atrocity crimes. States have the primary responsibility to investigate and prosecute crimes committed within their jurisdiction. While international courts and hybrid tribunals can play an important role where states are genuinely unwilling or unable to do so, the UN should draw on diverse mechanisms to identify risks and take early action to prevent countries from falling into greater crisis. We will continue to shine a light on appalling

violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law in situations such as Syria and Myanmar. There should be no impunity for those who perpetrate these crimes and atrocities.

Mr Chair, there have been a handful of suggestions within this chamber this morning that Responsibility to Protect is somehow discredited. But these voices are an insignificant minority set against the voices of support we have heard today. But our words of support need to result in real action. Yesterday, in this room, we recommitted ourselves to the UN Charter. We the peoples. But what good is that if we do not recommit ourselves to the Responsibility to Protect those peoples? We call on all member states to do all in their power to prevent and end atrocities against the peoples and to prosecute those responsible for them. We owe this to those who cannot protect themselves.

Thank you Mr Chairman.

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