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Address to Stanley Foundation Conference on the Responsibility to Protect

Ban Ki-moon

Thank you, Dr. Gregorian of the Carnegie Foundation, for your very kind introduction.

Excellencies, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen.

It's a great honour and pleasure for me to participate in this very important gathering and addressing this very esteemed group of experts and supporters of Responsibility to Protect. As Dr. Gregorian said, I just started my second term as Secretary-General and I know that when I was elected as Secretary-General for the second time, [I know that] all of you must have supported me, and I thank you very much.

This R2P has given me some opportunity of raising my voice and profile, and I really thank you for such an opportunity. I wish you all the best in this New Year even though I have met just briefly some of the participants, but I know many of you in person. I'm sorry that I'm not able to greet you in person this time but I wish you all the best in the New Year.

Today we mark the first decade in the life of the Responsibility to Protect. There will be many more, for we can now say with confidence that this fundamental principle of human protection is here to stay.

We salute the foresight of Gareth Evans, Mohamed Sahnoun and the distinguished members of their Commission, and of course my predecessor Kofi Annan. They pointed the way.

And we thank again Mr. Gregorian of the Carnegie Corporation, Mr. LowenKron of the MacArthur Foundation and Mr. Stanley of the Stanley Foundation, with whom I have been so much discussing this matter, for co-sponsoring this special day. We count on your continuing support and partnership.

While I have already known that this concept was borne by our distinguished colleagues, former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans and Dr. Robert Stanley. Today I came to know for the first time that the idea of this humanitarian response, this we are now talking about saving human lives. The United Nations is heavily engaged and committed to saving lives – human lives – natural disasters. Dr. Gregorian was one of the persons who has given the idea of an emergency response fund. He was not fully aware of how effectively this CERF is now saving thousands and thousands of lives. We are very much grateful for this kind of long foresight of Dr. Gareth Evans, Mohamed Sahnoun, and Dr.

Gregorian for their insight and foresight. Now we are working on how to save human lives in natural disasters. But today, we discuss how we can save lives in man-made disasters.

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues,

In 2011, history took a turn for the better. The Responsibility to Protect came of age; the principle was tested as never before.

The results were uneven but, at the end of the day, tens of thousands of lives were saved.

We gave hope to people long oppressed. In Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, South Sudan, Yemen and Syria, by our words and actions, we demonstrated that human protection is a defining purpose of the United Nations in the twenty-first century.

We also learned important lessons.

For one, we have learned that this Organization cannot stand on the sidelines when challenged to take preventive action. Where there is a "clear and present danger," we may need to define the field ... cautiously but proactively.

We have also learned delivering on the Responsibility to Protect requires partnership and common purpose. We get the best results when global and regional institutions push in the same direction.

In 2011, we stood firm for democracy in Côte d'Ivoire. Yet, we could not have succeeded without the leadership and partnership of the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS.

And I'd like to particularly recognize the presence of Mr. Abdul Ilah al-Khatib, who worked as the United Nations Special Envoy to Libya. I thank you very much for your contribution.

That in turn set the stage for Libya, where Mr. Al-Khatib has been travelling and negotiating with the then Libyan authorities. When Muammar Gaddafi threatened to kill his people "like rats," the Arab League and Organization of Islamic Cooperation called on the international community to act. Thus the Security Council could find the unity to do so.

We learned lessons about our own limitations, as well. Consider the recent violence in South Sudan. We saw it coming weeks before.

Yet we were not able to stop it - unfortunately. Nor was the government, which like others has primary responsibility for protecting its citizens.

The reason was painfully simple: we were denied the use of necessary resources ... in particular helicopters that would have given us mobility to bring all the UN Peacekeepers where there are no roads except by air mobility.

At the critical moment, I was reduced to begging for replacements from neighboring countries and missions. With limited resources, we tried our best.

So, a key challenge in putting the Responsibility to Protect into practice is this: how do we do our job, how do we deliver on Security Council mandates, when the very members of the Council do not give us the support we need ...

All these issues are enormously complex. That is why I have asked my Special Adviser, Ed Luck, to lead a system-wide assessment of how the UN can best employ the tools given to us under the Charter - and specifically Chapters VI, VII and VIII.

I know you will want to discuss all these matters in depth, especially the aspects that are dominating the news. Before we do so, however, let me speak to an issue that I believe has not received sufficient attention. That is the importance of prevention.

Today, I ask you to join me in making 2012 the Year of Prevention.

This is going to be one of my five generational opportunities of the United Nations for the coming five years.

The 2005 World Summit called for assisting States “under stress before crises and conflicts break out.”

Prevention does not mean looking the other way in times of crisis, vainly hoping that things will get better. We have done that too often. Nor can it be just a brief pause while Chapter VII “enforcement measures” are being prepared.

Prevention means proactive, decisive and early action to stop violence before it begins.

My recent report on preventive diplomacy sets forth the ways and means by which we are strengthening our capacities for mediation, fact-finding and peaceful settlement. We need to sharpen our tools for preventing atrocities as well.

Over the last year or two, we have seen encouraging successes. In Kenya, Kyrgyzstan and Guinea, the United Nations helped prevent, or at least limit, what we might call “atrocities crimes.”

There, as elsewhere, we learned an important fact: that the key to preventing genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and other crimes against humanity lies within each society. These crimes occur far less often in places where civil society is robust, where tolerance is practiced, and where diversity is celebrated. Political figures cannot incite mass violence for their own ends where the rights of minorities and the rule of law are respected.

That is why, during my second term as Secretary-General, the UN will redouble its efforts at training, education and capacity-building on human rights, humanitarian law and democratic values and practices.

We will undertake development and peacebuilding in ways that reduce tensions among groups and strengthen institutional barriers to sectarian violence.

Too often, we have seen how one round of violence ignites the next.

For societies under stress, early warning may come too late to prevent the outbreak of mass violence. Such situations call for a dynamic assessment of how such stresses are developing over time, and how the international community can help.

It means little, however, to get the assessment right if it is not followed by targeted, measured and determined action.

That action can take - and has taken - many forms. For instance, we have been quick to respond to incitement in Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and elsewhere.

Because outbreaks of mass violence are rarely spontaneous, we generally have the time and opportunity to remind government and opposition leaders that they could be held accountable by the International Criminal Court or other tribunals.

One of my greatest satisfactions as Secretary-General has been to help advance the powers of these courts - and to see how effective a deterrent the ICC, in particular, has become.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If we are going to be serious about prevention, then we need to develop more innovative ways to use the under-utilized tools of Chapter VI.

Truth can be a powerful weapon against those who try to hide or rationalize their criminality. It is the first step toward accountability.

I welcome, therefore, the Human Rights Council's growing use of commissions of inquiry, as in Syria and Libya. The Security Council can make more use of its own missions and its power to investigate under Article 34 of the Charter to look into situations before they escalate.

Fact-finding by the United Nations and regional and sub-regional arrangements should focus more intently on preventing atrocity crimes. In some cases, these efforts could be usefully supplemented by the deployment of unarmed observers from global and regional organizations, civil society and national police units.

The Arab League observer mission in Syria has encountered serious difficulties. The United Nations is helping with training and capacity-building, but clearly the situation calls for more than a small, circumscribed presence.

Used in measured and targeted ways, peacekeepers can help prevent atrocities as well as armed conflict. The African Union did so in Burundi, as did our own blue helmets in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

When national leaders want to protect their populations, there are ample consent-based tools under Chapters VI and VIII to assist them.

In Rwanda, Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, local groups were able to reach across sectarian lines to defuse tensions in some communities despite rising violence around them. Civil society could be critical to

avoiding an escalation of violence in Syria and South Sudan. We need to give such groups our support and encouragement.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me close by returning to some current challenges.

I have listened carefully to those who have raised concerns about how some Security Council mandates were carried out last year.

And I agree: at times, the execution of our collective responsibilities was not always perfect. In Côte d'Ivoire and Libya, some innocent lives were lost in the name of R2P. That is why the use of force is never our first choice. Many more lives were saved, however.

We all agree on the need for responsibility while protecting. In that spirit, I very much welcome the Brazilian initiative to open a dialogue on these matters.

Yet let us also remember: historically, our chief failing as an international community has been the reluctance to act in the face of serious threats. The result, too often, has been a loss of lives and credibility that haunt us ever after.

Let us not let the pendulum swing back to the past. Let us not make the best the enemy of the good.

A final point: we have been discussing, today, how to prepare ourselves for the next test of our common humanity.

We need not look far. That test is here - in Syria.

Since the uprising began, I have spoken out, forcefully and directly. I did so again just days ago in Lebanon at a conference on reform and democracy in the Arab world.

Stop the violence, I told President Assad. The path of repression is a dead-end.

Listen to your people, I said repeatedly. Listen to your people's genuine aspirations. I've told him publicly and privately in conversations. Change now, act bold and make decisive reforms before it is too late, before more innocents die.

Even as I make these calls, however, I am mindful of the complexities.

At a time when unity is required, the Security Council is deeply divided. Efforts by regional friends and organizations such as the Arab League are very welcome, but so far they have not borne fruit.

I am also acutely aware of the need to preserve my own diplomatic space for the crucial moment when the UN's good offices may be needed.

Such is the nature of the Responsibility to Protect. It can be a minefield of nuance, political calculation and competing national interests. The result too often is hesitation or inaction. This we cannot afford.

We must not forget how remarkably far we have come in so short time. The world has embraced the Responsibility to Protect - not because it is easy, but because it is right.

We therefore have a moral responsibility to push ahead.

Together, let us work, with optimism and determination, to make the Responsibility to Protect a living reality for the peoples of the world.

I thank you very much for your support.