
Rights up Front

May 2014

Promoting respect for human rights is a core purpose of the United Nations and defines its identity as an organization for people around the world.

Through the Charter and successive General Assembly resolutions, Member States have mandated the Secretary-General and the UN System to help them achieve the standards set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To do so, the UN System uses all the resources at its disposal, including its moral authority, diplomatic creativity and operational reach.

Member States have the primary responsibility for protecting their populations. Sometimes, however, they have been unable or unwilling to meet this obligation. At times, the UN System has also failed in its responsibility to promote and encourage respect for human rights.

Deterioration in respect for human rights can be a telling sign, an early warning, of worse things to come. By addressing such situations and ensuring accountability for the violation of human rights, the worsening of those violations and conflict can sometimes be avoided. Where conflict occurs nevertheless, the imperative for the UN System is the protection of civilians.

The challenge of ensuring effective protection has existed for many years and in a range of contexts. In some cases, entities within the UN System have failed to communicate or act on evidence of impending crises. The UN's Secretariat, Agencies, Funds and Programmes at times lacked a coherent system-wide strategy for responding to the risk of serious violations of human rights. The UN has not always been swift in deploying and empowering its staff.

At the same time, Member States have not always been able to reach agreement on concerted action, depriving the international community of its most effective means for preventing and ending serious violations.

Many recommendations for improving the UN's response to situations of serious violations have been made over the years – notably in the 1999 Independent Inquiry on UN Action in Rwanda and the review the same year of the fall of Srebrenica. Many of the recommendations made in these reports have been implemented and the UN System has become better at anticipating and responding to crises affecting civilian populations.

But the 2012 Internal Review Panel (IRP) findings on UN Action in Sri Lanka reminded us that there was much more to do. Indeed, in the last stages of the Sri Lankan war, the UN's efforts were characterized as a “systemic failure”.

Today, the agony of the people in Syria, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and elsewhere provide a test of the UN's ability to use the full breadth of its mandates and activities to protect the people it is meant to serve – and of Member States' willingness to fulfil their responsibilities.

In response to the IRP's recommendations, the Secretary-General seized the opportunity to ensure that the lessons of the past were fully acted upon. While there are limits to what even a fully coordinated and strategic UN can do when governments fail to protect their populations, or fail to agree on a course of action, the UN still must do everything it can to meet its responsibilities.

Rights up Front groups the specific recommendations of the IRP into six main areas of action. These are focused primarily on the UN Secretariat, Agencies, Funds and Programmes – and what each can do to improve the UN's collective response to future risks of serious violations of human rights. A number of elements are intended to complement Member States' action to discharge their responsibilities. The common theme of the actions is to place the protection of human rights and of people at the heart of UN strategies and operational activities.

Action 1: Integrating human rights into the lifeblood of the UN so all staff understand their own and the Organization's human rights obligations.

Action 2: Providing Member States with candid information with respect to peoples at risk of, or subject to, serious violations of human rights or humanitarian law.

Action 3: Ensuring coherent strategies of action on the ground and leveraging the UN System's capacities to respond in a concerted manner.

Action 4: Clarifying and streamlining procedures at Headquarters to enhance communication with the field and facilitate early, coordinated action.

Action 5: Strengthening the UN's human rights capacity, particularly through better coordination of its human rights entities.

Action 6: Developing a common UN system for information management on serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

These actions form part of the responsibilities of the UN as set out by the Charter and Member States. Implementation requires different ways of doing things, including some reprioritization of existing resources, which will need to be approved by Member States as appropriate.

The success of *Rights up Front* depends on leadership at every level – to show the courage to speak up for the values in the Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to back staff demonstrating such courage, to encourage teamwork and collaboration and to harness the diverse mandates of the UN System to the achievement of the UN System's core purposes.

Rights up Front speaks to the essence of the United Nations. It is a lens through which the Organization will examine and respond to threats of serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law and by that identify actions needed to prevent mass atrocities and armed conflict.