

UNITED NATIONS

NATIONS UNIES

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**THE DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**Informal remarks at briefing of the General Assembly  
on Rights up Front**

17 December 2013

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Almost 20 years ago, in 1994 and 1995, the UN System failed to prevent genocide in Rwanda and Srebrenica.

Those horrendous events led us all to say “never again.” We said we would have to do more to prevent serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

Despite much effort, since 1995 hundreds of thousands of people have died as a result of mass atrocities and tens of millions have been displaced. The consequences for the victims and their families have been staggering. The wider impact has been disastrous for peace and security as well as for economic and social development.

But steps forward have been taken. World leaders endorsed the “responsibility to protect” in 2005. And Member States have over the years articulated an increasingly detailed agenda for the protection of civilians.

We have also enhanced our human rights capacities. And there have been positive developments in the field of international criminal justice with strengthened accountability and inroads against impunity.

When people in today’s world are at risk or subject to serious violations, they expect and request the United Nations to act. And we do. UN staff is on the ground every day, across the world, providing assistance, supporting efforts to protect human rights and to end conflict. They show great courage in the process, as I have recently seen myself in Afghanistan, Mali and Somalia.

For many years, the General Assembly and Member States have underlined the importance of prevention and have requested the UN system to do all it can to identify and respond to crises before they occur.

However, in practice, our response to crisis often comes when a situation has deteriorated to the point where only a substantial political or peacekeeping mission can deal with the problems.

These missions are often launched late in the day and are very costly. They demand substantial resources that could otherwise be dedicated to social and economic development.

Mr. President,

The UN Charter states that “We, the peoples of the United Nations” are determined to reaffirm “faith in fundamental human rights, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small”.

We just celebrated the 65th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Outcome Document of the World Summit of 2005 concluded that there is no development without peace, there is no peace without development, and there is neither without human rights.

With this background, I am here today to brief the Member States of the General Assembly on a new initiative of the Secretary-General, which we are calling “Rights up Front.”

The need for early action, and the crucial role of responding early to human rights violations, is at the heart of the “Rights up Front” initiative. As you may recall, the Secretary-General spoke briefly about this when he addressed the Assembly on September 24 and November 11 this year.

As he indicated on those occasions, the crises we are facing in Syria and the Central African Republic remind us that serious violations of human rights are often our clearest early warning of emerging conflict.

In November 2012, the Secretary-General released the report of his Internal Review Panel on UN Action in Sri Lanka. The Panel concluded that there had been a “systemic failure” of UN action during the final stages of that conflict.

It also concluded that the UN Secretariat and Funds and Programmes were not given the support they needed to carry out the responsibilities which the Member States had set for the Organization.

In the beginning of this year, the Secretary-General asked me to oversee the development of proposed actions, by an interdepartmental/interagency working group, to implement the report’s recommendations. He also wanted me to ensure that the UN Secretariat, Programmes and Funds meet the responsibilities given to them by the Charter and Member States.

The working group’s report was presented to me and to the Secretary-General in July this year. The Secretary-General endorsed it and requested that it be implemented inside the UN system.

This internal process is designed to identify how the System can better improve its performance within the mandated areas of its work. In this pursuit we are, of course, committed to transparency and to have Member States’ support.

We are particularly determined to ensure that we do better in heeding Member States’ calls for preventive action. In improving the way we deal with potential crises we hope to respond more effectively when there is a risk that serious violations of international human rights or of humanitarian law could turn into mass atrocities.

“Rights up Front” is framed in terms of the protection of human rights, but it also includes the task of protection of civilians. In this context, the importance of preventive efforts is consistently emphasized.

Another central aspect of the Rights up Front Action Plan is better organizational preparedness by the UN. The Secretariat, Funds and Programmes are to ensure that the UN System, both on the ground and at HQ, is appropriately prepared – early on – to deal with evolving crisis situations.

Mr. President,

Specifically, and in conclusion, the Rights up Front initiative involves six areas of action:

- First, the Secretary-General has recently renewed his and our staff's commitment to the UN's core purpose of promoting respect for human rights. There will be actions to emphasize this aspect of the Charter and relevant General Assembly resolutions through training, induction and mentoring programmes for UN staff.
- Second, we will do better at meeting our core responsibility to provide Member States with the information you need in order to respond to human rights violations.
- Third, on the ground, we will be more attuned to situations where there is a risk of serious human rights abuses or violations of international humanitarian law. Wherever there is a UN presence, we have to ensure that it is equipped for the responsibilities that such potential crises entail.
- Fourth, at Headquarters, we will adopt a more coherent approach to our coordination of the UN response. This means we will be strengthening our dialogue and engagement with the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Human Rights Council. We will also provide earlier and more coherent support to our teams on the ground before a crisis emerges. When a crisis cannot be avoided, our response will be guided by the need to protect civilians and their human rights, as well as address their humanitarian plight, as we see now in the Central African Republic. In all these pursuits, we aim to respond and act as "One UN".
- Fifth, we must better organize our human rights staff and offices. They must be able to identify risks of serious violations of human rights or international humanitarian law that could lead to atrocities. And they must advise the wider UN system accordingly in a coherent fashion.
- Sixth, underpinning all these activities will be better information management on threats and risks to populations, both for planning operational activities and for sharing with Member States.

Mr. President,

A lack of broad and timely political support has been a key obstacle to early and effective action to prevent human rights crises. Together with Member States we will need to explore ways of strengthening our collective political will to react and act when crises are unfolding.

It is irrefutable, and needs repeating, that serious human rights violations are the best early warning of impending atrocities. If we fail to act early, the human, political and economic costs can be devastating as we know far too well. This calls for a more alert, flexible and coordinated UN System, both on the ground and at headquarters. This is what the Rights up Front initiative aims to accomplish.

The chance of success of these efforts will to a large extent depend on the support we receive from you, the Member States. Up to this stage, we have managed this programme without additional resources, relying on secondments. As we move forward, any requirements for new resources, or proposals to shift resources would, of course, be discussed and approved by Member States through regular budget processes.

We look forward to hearing your views today and stand ready to brief you on progress on this initiative periodically. At the end of this briefing we will distribute an informal summary of the Rights up Front initiative.

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