

Embassy Magazine

Using witnesses in the fight for human rights

Canada should leverage its Arab League links to pressure Russia and China on Syria.

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Ending genocide and other mass atrocities is a noble goal not yet realized, yet there is reason for hope.

In 2001, thanks to the leadership of Canada, a new international security and human rights doctrine was introduced. Known as the Responsibility to Protect, in 2005 all 192 countries seated at the United Nations endorsed the principle that should a country be unwilling or unable to protect its citizens from genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes or ethnic cleansing, then the international community must take action.

In the ten years since the R2P doctrine came into existence, the world has suffered instances of grave, foreseeable, and preventable mass atrocities. Some of these instances amounted to crimes against humanity, and even genocide. The political will to mount a robust protection mission was absent in the case of Darfur, where the government of Sudan killed hundreds of thousands of its own civilians. As many scholars and activists note, Darfur was R2P's first test, and the first failure of the international community to implement the new norm to protect civilians.

More recently, the world has watched ruthless leaders clinging to power. For example, China and Russia have so far blocked the United Nations Security Council from acting collectively in response to the situation in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad continues his brutal crackdown. Meanwhile, in this age of the Internet, the iPhone, Twitter, Facebook, and Skype, collective memory is always growing. And increasingly, ordinary people are showing a willingness to lead the way in documenting human rights crimes and holding despots to account.

In Sudan, the same regime indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes—including genocide—in Darfur has recently unleashed indiscriminate bombardment of civilians in Southern Kordofan. The Enough Project, an anti genocide group in Washington, DC, has produced evidence that the Khartoum regime's actions in South Kordofan amount to a state-sponsored ethnic cleansing campaign, aimed at driving the Nuba people from the Nuba Mountains.

Yet in a Darfur redux situation, President Omar al-Bashir, an indicted genocidaire, has largely been allowed to conduct this campaign without meaningful action by the UN. But that does not

mean Bashir will get away free, thanks to the power of citizen journalists, social media, Hollywood star power, and commercial satellites.

Enough is part of a consortium called the Satellite Sentinel Project—conceived in October 2010 by George Clooney while on a trip to Southern Sudan with Enough's Co-founder, John Prendergast. Using high-resolution satellite imagery provided by DigitalGlobe and analyzed by a team at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, with additional analysis by DigitalGlobe, SSP is the world's first early-warning system to detect, deter and document threats to human security. The Enough Project provides field reports, communications strategy, and uses social media to involve people around the world in pressuring governments to respond.

Since its launch in December, SSP has correctly predicted an armed invasion of Sudan's disputed border region of Abyei, confirmed village razings and civilian displacement, and documented eyewitness reports along with irrefutable, near-real-time visual evidence of mass killings and eight mass graves in South Kordofan.

SSP cannot single-handedly stop all the violence along Sudan's border. But what SSP can do is put evidence of mass atrocities on the six o'clock news, so that no officials can claim "we did not know". SSP is filling an information gap and involving ordinary people in moving the world ever closer to the noble goal of making "never again" a reality.

In the fight to protect human rights, we must continue to turn words into deeds. In Libya and Cote d'Ivoire, the international community acted to protect civilians in the face of threatened and actual mass atrocities. In Sudan and Syria, civilians continue to cry out for that same protection. We must not and cannot ignore them.

The international community must act urgently to protect civilians in Sudan, South Sudan and Syria. The UN Security Council must condemn the government of Sudan for violating the sovereignty of South Sudan in order to bomb refugee camps, as Khartoum did in South Sudan's Upper Nile and Unity states on November 8 and 10.

Canada, a strong middle power, has an important role to play in working with the United States to mobilize the international community with the goal enforcing a no-fly zone along the Sudanese border, on the South Sudanese side, as this would not require a UN Security Council resolution. The council must demand that Khartoum cease indiscriminate bombing campaigns against its own people in the border states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

The international community must urgently press for full and unimpeded access for international humanitarian organizations to South Kordofan and Blue Nile, where people have not been able to plant or tend crops, due to daily bombing. Given the absence of consent by the Sudanese government, Canada, the United States and international partners should immediately prepare alternative means of distributing emergency assistance to civilians in any such area where denial of aid is being used as a weapon of war.

Regarding Syria, Canada should leverage its position in both the Commonwealth and La Francophonie by conducting a diplomatic surge in tandem with members of the Arab League

who are associated with these two international groups. With Turkey and the Arab League growing tired of Assad's murderous ways, a further diplomatic push by Canada might publicly humiliate Russia and China, the two countries who have shielded Damascus in the UN Security Council and used their veto power to block non-military responses to the crisis.

Such a principled stand might also help convince Moscow and Beijing that they are standing on the wrong side of history, especially in an era where private citizens and groups can gather visual evidence in near real-time that crimes against humanity are being committed on the ground.

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