

H & K Communications

72 Elvaston Avenue
Nepean, Ontario
K2G 3X9

Phone: (613) 829-1800
Fax: (613) 829-2449
E-mail: hturkow@rogers.com

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INTERVENING IN SYRIA

ANNA MARIA TREMONTI (Host): Residents in the Syrian city of Homs are saying the Syrian army is still shelling its central district today even though Syrian rebels and forces loyal to the Damascus have agreed to a temporary truce. The International Committee of the Red Cross is waiting to send in rescue teams to give aid to the wounded trapped in the city. After ten new days of fighting, hundreds of civilians remain stuck in the old city. It's just the latest bloody chapter in Syria. The UN says more than 10,000 people have been killed by government forces during this conflict. The world is alarmed by the Syrian crisis, but so far that alarm has not led to any real intervention. It has, however, led to a lot of talk. In April US President Barack Obama spoke of the responsibility to intervene while at the Holocaust Museum in Washington.

BARACK OBAMA (President of the United States): Preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States of America. It does not mean that we intervene militarily every time there's an injustice in the world. We cannot and

should not. It does mean we possess many tools, diplomatic and political and economic and financial and intelligence and law enforcement and our moral suasion. And using these tools over the past three years, I believe, I know that we have saved countless lives.

TREMONTI: Now, President Obama used that speech to introduce a new Atrocities Prevention Board to coordinate the US response to mass killings around the world. Romeo Dallaire witnessed such an event up close and knows the consequences of not responding. In 1994 General Dallaire commanded the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda. He watched helplessly as some 800,000 people were murdered. Senator Romeo Dallaire joins me from Ottawa. Good morning.

ROMEO DALLAIRE (Senator, Liberal Party of Canada):
Good morning to you.

TREMONTI: We just heard Barack Obama proclaiming that stopping atrocities is a national security and moral issue. What do you think?

DALLAIRE: He is dead right. And if we go back to the nineties, be it in Yugoslavia or Rwanda where countries did inquire on the catastrophic situations that were going on at the time, their response was always,

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well, really there's nothing here. There's no strategic resources. There's no strategic value of the country. The only thing that's here are human beings. There's too many of them anyway. It's overpopulated. And so, we're not going to come and intervene. And so, the human, humanity, the sense of human beings didn't sway. Now, we've been able in fact to go nearly light years in the last nearly 20 years of getting not only the leaders at least being questioned on whether we should intervene or not, but we're getting tools to do it. And the Americans under Obama has implemented, with a lot of influence from Samantha Powers, who's been working extensively there and with the report that was produced out of Concordia on the will to intervene, have implemented a concept of getting the country ready to not just respond to crisis in a crisis mode, but in fact to have a capability of anticipating and even preparing for a whole sequence of events that are done in a deliberate kind of process and not simply off the back of a cigarette pack. So, he's leading the exercise. Everybody else is still picking their nose trying to figure out whether they really want to get involved or whether they're just going to do the rhetoric.

TREMONTI: Well, I want to ask about that because, you know, we see so many western officials right now making statements on Syria. We have also all seen the pictures, you know, limp babies, bullets in their heads,

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massacres of civilians, cities where the bombing has gone on. How, how does that work? How do western leaders look at that and make these comments and then look away and it continues the next day?

DALLAIRE: Well, the, the, first of all, the consciousness that, of what is going on is now so much more prevalent than before. I mean, nobody can say that they don't know what's going on be it through the social communications, be it through the NGOs and necessarily the advancement of, of the media. So, people know what's going on on the ground. So, it's not as if you're ignorant to it. On the contrary. They're quite well informed on what's happening.

TREMONTI: But there's a political art in saying the right thing and then looking away, isn't there?

DALLAIRE: Well, in fact the reason that maybe we're left with that very horrific scenario of them dragging their heels or not even wanting to get into dirtying their hands into the situation is they don't know what to do. There's one thing to bring out a doctrine of responsibility to protect and making sovereignty no more an absolute when mass atrocities or mass abuse of human rights are incurred on a population. But it's another thing to operationalize it.

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TREMONTI: Is that what happened in Rwanda, they didn't know what to do, because you kind of did know what they needed to do?

DALLAIRE: In Rwanda they didn't give a damn. In Rwanda it was of no consequence. In Rwanda they were up to their ears in Cambodia, Yugoslavia and that really drained all their, their attention. They were quite prepared to use the UN and put in even through Dayton 67,000 troops in Yugoslavia, but they were willing to pull everybody out of Rwanda and let them slaughter more people and rape more people than in Yugoslavia. We've moved beyond that because we've been able to shame the international community in saying, hey, it wasn't the UN that failed. It was every sovereign state that make up the UN refused to give the UN the tools to try to either prevent it or stop it.

TREMONTI: Well, you see, that brings me back to the question of Rwanda. You say that after, you know, after all of the failures of Rwanda we've moved beyond that, but we could forgive Syrian civilians for wondering if we have.

DALLAIRE: Oh, I think that Syrian civilians who are in the midst of it have all the right to say that, hey, even worse than in the scenario of Rwanda where the value of human life and the idea of intervention when it wasn't in your self interest wouldn't even, wouldn't even show on, on the radar scope.

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Now the Syrians could argue even more vehemently that, hey, there are tools out there. There's a doctrine. There's a concept out there. There's an acknowledgement that this is inappropriate and in fact catastrophic. So, why aren't you doing it?

TREMONTI: Last year the UN Security Council sanctioned intervention in Libya. They have been unwilling to intervene in Syria. Why do you think that is?

DALLAIRE: Well, now we're getting into the real heart of the problem. Libya was an easier target. Libya was an easier target to go through the six criteria of analysis of a situation by which in the end of that analysis of the six you can then intervene. And one of the primary criteria is the chances of success. Syria is another scenario. Why? Because the stronger the dictator is militarily, the more reticent people are willing to spill blood to go in and to stop him. And why is he stronger militarily, is because the members of the permanent five, the permanent five members of the Security Council have armed them to the teeth. And so, the same gang that are starting to try to figure out how we're going to stop this stuff are the ones that are arming him to give them such a power base that it makes military intervention a near impossibility unless you're prepared to take significant casualties. But there is a kicker in this and the kicker is the following. Assad has not killed enough to really tripwire the international community to wanting to take the

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risks of them spilling blood in trying to sort this out. And so, without that threshold being cut we now find ourselves using UN, old-think methodologies like sending in unarmed UN observers as the tool to think that we're going to bring a certain attenuation of the conflict. That is not the tool of this era. What is the tool of this era is a far more demonstrative will, which means, yes, you go in, you do observe, but you've also got a capability, of when you observe and you see it doesn't work, to take action on it.

TREMONTI: Romeo Dallaire, thanks for your thoughts.

DALLAIRE: Well, you keep at it.

TREMONTI: Bye, bye.

DALLAIRE: Thank you very much.

TREMONTI: Retired General Romeo Dallaire, the former commander of the United Nations peacekeeping force in Rwanda. He is a Canadian senator. He joined us from Ottawa. Well, to help us better understand why the world intervenes sometimes and not other times, I'm joined by two guests. Robert Fowler had a long career as a Canadian diplomat, including serving as the Canadian ambassador to the UN and a foreign policy advisor for three prime ministers and deputy minister of defence. You may also recall that he is the author of *A Season in*

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Hell: My 130 Days in the Sahara with Al Qaeda. He was kidnapped by Al Qaeda and later freed and wrote about it. Robert Fowler is in Ottawa. Jonathan Schanzer is the vice-president for research at the Washington-based think tank The Foundation for Defence of Democracies. Good morning to you both.

PANEL: Good morning Anna Maria.

TREMONTI: Gentlemen, before we even start I just want to bring us all up to date on what's going on in the news today. Right now The Guardian is reporting that Assad may be offered clemency by Britain and the US if he joins peace talks. There's a story on Reuters out of Amman that says the pilot of a Syrian fighter jet has just flown to Jordan and asked for asylum. And there's a story on Canadian Press from Murray Brewster that says the Canadian military is drawing up contingency plans in case the Harper government chooses to join any international intervention in Syria. So against all of that backdrop, Jonathan Schanzer let's begin with you. We just heard Romeo Dallaire say the decision to intervene in Syria gets really complicated. What's your perspective on this?

JONATHAN SCHANZER (Vice-President, The Foundation for Defence of Democracies): Well, he's right. It is very complicated. And it was actually fascinating to listen to him because he was really at the centre of a controversy of, you know, of, you know, an opportunity to intervene and to prevent

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a mass killing and at the end of the day the UN decided not to do it. I think at this point we're not looking at the UN being able to do a thing, but we are looking at western governments. We're looking at the United States. And from my perspective here it is just not politically expedient for the United States to intervene. We're looking at, you know, Barack Obama who's standing for re-election in November in a country that is, first of all, trying to recover from, you know, economic damage that resulted from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. And then there's also just the general population here that is more weary. And so, you've got a very anti-war population right now. But yet when you played that, that bit of tape from the Holocaust Museum the President made it very clear that, that it was a moral responsibility for the United States. So, we're really caught right now between morality and political expediency and that's why we're stuck. I mean, the fact that we've got 13,000 people killed in Syria or whatever the number, official number happens to be, we've passed the threshold. It's very clear to everybody that there is mass murder taking place. But yet we're, we're frozen.

TREMONTI: Well, it is that grey area that I'm trying to explore today, that morality between morality and expediency. Do you agree Robert Fowler? Is that where the world is stuck right now on Syria?

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ROBERT FOWLER (Former Canadian Diplomat): Yeah, I think probably. I do agree. Perhaps Jonathan and I might, might disagree about the advisability of an actual intervention. Quite aside from not being politically expedient, I'm not sure it is, would be militarily wise or even geo-strategically wise. But kind of let's get into that in a moment. I agree there is a huge moral dilemma. Romeo has made that clear. Jonathan has agreed. And I would agree completely with Romeo that the circumstances which pertained in Rwanda in the spring of '94 cried out for an intervention which would have met everybody's criteria very easily. And I agree with Romeo, as he's said and he's written, that that horror was stoppable, that horror, which by the way, one night of work in Rwanda in the spring of '94 represents the number of casualties we have seen in Syria thus far.

TREMONTI: Well, so, Robert Fowler, take us into the minds and the rooms of those who would be having this discussion, these high level discussions where you have the deputy ministers and the diplomats and the ministers. How do you justify turning away from helping people who you know are being slaughtered by the governments? What kind of conversation goes on in those rooms?

FOWLER: I'm going to sound very hard-hearted and cynical here Anna Maria for a moment. But, I mean horrible things happen in our world all

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the time and we can't fix them all. I mean, that is reality. R2P is a lovely idea, but its time, in my view, has not come because essentially the will is not there. The will to pay the cost of many interventions, the will to pay the cost in blood and treasure and risk of greater contagion is not there. If you put it to a vote tomorrow in the Security Council or the, or even the General Assembly, I mean, would the world agree that there was some automatic engagement of the world when bad things happened? I don't think it would get three votes. That, that, it is, it is a very tough conclusion. I agree with Jonathan and with Romeo that Libya seemed reasonably doable, that is that NATO would provide the air force for god knows who on the ground. There were happily contingent NATO bases in, in Sicily that made the intervention easy. And above all, the intelligence assessment was that what was on the ground in Libya didn't pose any particularly grave risk to allied pilots flying above Libya. That is certainly not the case in Syria.

TREMONTI: Jonathan Schanzer, what do you think?

SCHANZER: I agree. I think we can look at what's happened in Syria and we know that the Russians for example have been providing the weaponry to be able to fend off an attack. And this is, you know, actually one other wrinkle in, in the Syria mess here is that, you know, we've got what I would call state-sponsors for the state sponsors of terror and, and I think a lack of action on the

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part of the international community to condemn or to take action against those countries as well. But you know, you know, I think, you know, we can all agree that there is a, a trigger point. And what I've found is that usually you realize that trigger point after the fact. In other words, you know, the world waits. The world has every indication that you've got, you know, an authoritarian regime or a despotic regime that is intent on killing, you know, large numbers of a population and we sit by and we wait and we say we haven't hit the threshold, we haven't hit the threshold. And then you have a mass murder. And then we look back and we say, well, that was the moment where we should have intervened and we didn't.

TREMONTI: Well, you know, I mean, we can look at Rwanda. But you know, the United States did intervene in, in the Balkan war. So, what was the trigger from one versus the other Jonathan?

SCHANZER: Well, you know, I think, you could put people on the ground or you can intervene, but then there is a question of how much action do you take or to what extent you intervene. And I think, you know, if you look at Libya, I mean the President said, Barack Obama said that, you know, we're going in because we, you know, we think we're on the brink of a humanitarian disaster in Benghazi. And you know, I would argue that the number of people that might have been killed in, you know, in that massacre probably totals the number that we've

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seen so far in Syria that have been killed. But you know, it was, again, it was about expediency. It was about how easily we would be able to carry out the mission, how easily we would be able to get out. And you know, and so the calculus is a very fuzzy one and I think that, that world leaders will often bend to make sure that it meets their needs. And so, you know, it's a very frustrating thing to watch. I fully understand, by the way, that Syria would be a very complicated operation. You've got a number of Syrian allies that could create problems for us, including Iran. But I also think that it is in the west's strategic interest to topple Assad. So, I think that even, I mean, to a certain extent it sweetens the deal while there are these complications that might deter us from intervention.

TREMONTI: So, we're almost out of time here. But Robert Fowler, the G20 leaders were just meeting. Do you think that there, some people took the Russian president aside and talked to him?

FOWLER: Well, actually I don't think that many people did. Certainly we, we westerners did. We NATO members did. But I think there's a pretty strong feeling in the world against western countries seeking to sort out other countries on the basis of western interests or values. That's the reality. That's the basis of the Chinese position. Everybody's afraid that we might sort them out at

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some point or another. The last outings we've had in terms of sorting out, I mean, take it from Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya, none of them have gone very well.

TREMONTI: We have to leave it there. That's actually a very telling point to leave it on. But we're out of time. Thank you, both of you, for weighing in on this today.

SCHANZER: Thank you.

FOWLER: Right. Thanks.

TREMONTI: That is Robert Fowler, former Canadian diplomat and deputy minister. He joined us from Ottawa. He is the author of *A Season in Hell: My 130 Days in the Sahara with Al Qaeda*. And Jonathan Schanzer is the vice-president for research at the Washington-based think tank The Foundation for Defence of Democracies. We reached him in Washington, DC.

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