

Uneven Development is the Root of Many Crimes

By Ngugi wa Thiong'o¹

The phrase, responsibility to protect, brings to my mind painful memories of lack of protection of many people who died of ethnic cleansing in Kenya earlier this year. The incidents of ethnic cleansing followed disputed results of the Presidential elections. The character of the gruesome scenes was captured in the story of a child fleeing from the flames of a torched church where he and his parents had sought refuge only to be captured and thrown back into the flames. Even in times of war, in pre-colonial times among neighboring communities, there had always been rules protecting children and women. Questions asked by survivors expressed shock and incomprehension: they were our neighbors; our children played together; how could they do this to us? The scene was set for counter acts of ethnic cleansing, the new wave of

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victims only connected to the original perpetrators by their ethnicity. Ordinary working people, often united by their poverty, were set against one another by a middleclass political elite tele-guiding the horror from the safety of their palaces and cocktail circuits in the cities. I felt paralyzed by helplessness which must have been a thousand times more intense for those in the country especially when the State, for a time, seemed unable to control the situation. Far away in California in response to a call by the BBC I could only think of the United Nations as the only body that could intervene, investigate and hopefully hold those who incited the war of poor on poor to account. As it turned out, it was the efforts of UN through Kofi Annan as the emissary that eventually helped in putting down the flames and ensuring an uneasy peace that stopped the flow of blood.

Even so, I knew that what was happening in my beloved Kenya had already been enacted in Rwanda, Bosnia, Iraq, reminding

me of Shakespeare in Julius Ceaser where the assassins, after bathing in the blood of their victims, ask how many times shall this our deeds be done in nations and states as yet unborn?

Yes, how many times! I personally welcome the very impressive report of the Secretary General on the implementation of the responsibility to protect, derived from the thoughtful declaration of the 2005 World Summit. It should be an excellent basis for response to that question by Shakespeare. For, even one more time, anywhere in the world, is one too many. We have to free humanity from the scourges of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against its very human essence. The ideal calls for implementation.

The devil, however, lies in the context of implementation in terms of definition, history and the contemporary global situation. Terms like the International Community have often been too narrowly evoked to make it sound as if the West is the gatekeeper who determines who is to be allowed into that

community and who is to be outlawed. The emphasis on the United Nations is the right one; but it should be noted that e United Nations cover, the security council blessings in particular, has sometimes been used to legitimate invasions and overthrow of regimes the West deems intolerable. In Africa, Patrick Lumumba of the Congo was killed with the eyes of the United Nations forces he had invited, looking the other way. Europe is disproportionately represented in the Security Council; and that one continent, Africa, has no veto.

A degree of humility is called for in all nations, big and small, and a holier than thou attitudes will not do, for history of the modern tells of a more complicated story. The worst instances of genocide and wanton massacres of other people have come from Europe. Hitlerism was not an exception in European history of relationship with other peoples. Every colonizing nation in the past has been involved in crimes against humanity. Slave trade and plantation slavery are obvious.

Africa, America, and Australia have got stories of indigenous populations depleted, displaced, by Europe. Historian David Stannard has written of the American holocaust in relationship to the fate of Native peoples. In my own country Kenya, in their war against the Mau Mau Resistance Movement, the British put thousands into concentration camps and villages; and it is to be noted that for the duration of the British colonial state, Africans in Kenya could form political organizations only on ethnic basis, except for three years before independence. It is not a matter of dwelling on the past. But the past has lessons for us all.

The document rightly calls for timely and decisive response. The spectre of Rwanda will long haunt our memory. But obviously long term preventive measures that would make interventions unnecessary should be an integral part of the implementation. In the annex, the document, again talks of early warning and assessment. One of those early warning is

right in front of our eyes: it is there in the economic world we have today.

There are two major divisions or faultlines in the world today. One is the division between a minority of very wealthy nations and a majority of very poor nations. The gap between them in terms of wealth and power increases and deepens daily. The irony is that this minority of nations consume ninety per cent of the resources of the poor nations. The poor nations end up giving aid to the wealthy. This pattern is often reproduced within nations where some regions are wealthier than others within the same territory. Oil may be discovered in one region of a country but the benefits may even bypass the dwellers of the region where it was discovered. The same story on the global level, where the resources of poor nations end up befitting elsewhere. This is the vertical division between nations in the world and between regions in the same territory. But within all nations (and even regions), there is another

division between a minority of social haves and a majority of social have-nots. And yet once again, the minority of haves depend on the majority of have nots. The beggar and the homeless proliferate in the major cities of the world. The third figure, the prisoner, probably the fastest growing demographic in all nations, is often hidden from view. Some nations have over a million people in prison, more than the population of a quite number of member states of the UN. There are many nations hidden from view within many nations. These two divisions of wealth and power, between nations and regions; and within nations and regions, are the structural basis of the instability in the world today and of the many of these crimes we are talking about today.

It seems to me that if we are looking for long term solutions that would make interventions unnecessary, we also ought to question the view of development which focuses on the middleclass and above. The middleclass does not constitute a

nation. People do, working people. It seems to me that what Obama is calling development from bottom up should be the goal of all nations. Development should not be measured from the point of view of those at the top of the mountain but those at the bottom. Only by closing the two major divisions between nations/regions and within nations/regions can we begin to address the structural basis of crimes against humanity. Man made poverty is also a crime against humanity. That's why I think that the global community, through a strengthened and democratic United Nations and its organs, should look at structural uneven development as an integral part of the implementation of the responsibility to protect.