

## Conflicts around the world

# IS INTERVENTION JUSTIFIED?

On February 15, Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan participated in a seminar at the International Peace Academy in New York City. The topic was the report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). For several years Mr. Annan has been urging the international community to forge a consensus on the sensitive issue of the right of humanitarian intervention. Responding to his challenge, in fall 2000 Canada established the ICISS, with a membership of 12 (including 2 Canadians). After a year of intensive worldwide consultations, research, deliberation and discussions, last December the Commission released its report entitled *The Responsibility to Protect*.

### Intervention versus sovereignty

Intervening in another country's affairs has always been a very sensitive issue. States with the military capability may be criticized when they step in to protect populations in danger—as happened in Somalia in 1992–93, Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999. At other times they have been blamed for not intervening—as in Rwanda in 1994, when genocide took 800,000 lives.

The ICISS wrestled with one major question: Should the international community accept the sanctity of state sovereignty and do nothing to stop massive human rights violations, or should it intervene to protect populations in danger? The Commission unambiguously favoured intervention,



Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham (right) with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (left) and International Peace Academy President David Malone at the February 2002 seminar on the report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty

with the proviso that any military action be a last resort and that the decision to intervene be based on a key principle: Sovereign states are responsible for protecting their own citizens from disasters that can be avoided, whether mass murder, systematic rape or famine; but when they are unwilling or unable to act, the responsibility must be borne by the international community.

In the view of the Commission, this responsibility of the international community—and especially of the UN Security Council—entails certain explicit obligations. Among them: the responsibility to prevent conflicts by eliminating their root causes and to undertake reconstruction in the aftermath of a conflict.

### Changing the discourse of diplomacy

The ICISS report was warmly welcomed by Minister Graham, who commented, “By changing the discourse of diplomacy to ‘the responsibility to protect,’ the Commission has made an extraordinary contribution to the

theory of international affairs.” He added that he was very satisfied with the recommendations of the report, and that Canada would now play a leading role in ensuring that it receives appropriate follow-up and sustained, positive and constructive attention from the international community.

Mr. Annan thanked Canada for establishing the ICISS and lauded the work of the Commission. To ICISS members he said, “How to protect individual lives while maintaining and even strengthening the sovereignty of states has become clearer with the publication of this report. You are taking away the last excuses of the international community for doing nothing when doing something can save lives.”

On the Web site of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, you can find the text of its report, biographies of Commission members and other related information. Visit: [www.iciss-ciise.gc.ca](http://www.iciss-ciise.gc.ca)