

Reconciling State Sovereignty and Humanitarian Action:

The difficult issue of when to INTERVENE

If humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica—to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity? . . . Surely no legal principle—not even sovereignty—can ever shield crimes against humanity. . . . Armed intervention must always remain the option of last resort, but in the face of mass murder, it is an option that cannot be relinquished.

—We the Peoples
UN SECRETARY-GENERAL'S MILLENNIUM REPORT, 2000

Is there a right or responsibility to intervene in countries where human rights and humanitarian standards appear to be massively at risk? If so, does the international community have the will and the capacity to act? These are among the most troubling and difficult questions facing the world today. They do not lend themselves to easy answers. And yet, with the rise in bloody ethnic conflicts and civil strife since the end of the Cold War, it is ever more urgent to resolve questions about our responsibility for enforcing humanitarian standards.

In his Report to the UN Millennium Summit, Secretary-General Annan summed up the impasse: "National sovereignty offers vital protection to small and weak states. But it should not be a shield for crimes against humanity. It is time for world leaders to come to grips with the issue."

Canada leads action

Last September, Canada took up the Secretary-General's challenge by creating the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). The step was announced by Prime Minister Chrétien in his address to the Millennium Assembly. The Commission has a mandate to bring the issue out into the open and build a global political consensus on how to move forward.

Foreign Affairs Minister John Manley with the co-chairs of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in Ottawa, November 5. From left: Mohamed Sahnoun, Minister Manley and Gareth Evans

Liberian child pleading for UN intervention during civil strife in Liberia in 1996



photo: CANAPRESS

The blue-ribbon panel consists of 11 internationally recognized experts from North and South. Leading its work are Gareth Evans, former Foreign Minister of Australia and current President of the International Crisis Group, and Mohamed Sahnoun of Algeria, a Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on issues related to the Horn of Africa.

The ICISS held its first meeting in Ottawa on November 5 and 6. During it, Commissioners began to consider the range of political, legal, moral and practical issues that will guide their work.

By building on and complementing existing efforts, the ICISS will draw on the best thinking of scholars, non-governmental organizations and other experts in international round table sessions and other forums. It will also sponsor analysis of the issue through a global research network.

Assisting the Commission in building high-level political support will be an advisory board of current and former foreign ministers, former heads of state, and other eminent persons from the political, legal, academic and humanitarian assistance fields.

The ICISS will submit its report and recommendations to Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, who will present it to the UN Secretary-General and the international community at the fall 2001 session of the UN General Assembly. ●—

To learn more about the work of the Commission, visit its Web site:
www.iciss.gc.ca