

The principle known as 'responsibility to protect' – safeguarding populations from genocide and war crimes – must be turned into practical steps to ensure that societies are no longer devastated by such atrocities, Estonia's President told the General Assembly today.

In a speech in New York to the Assembly's annual general debate, Toomas Hendrik Ilves said "it is vital that we develop common practices and the capacity to implement the principle" known as responsibility to protect.

"Protecting civilians from atrocities is not just about 'protection.' It also means bringing perpetrators of crimes and atrocities against civilians to justice," said Mr. Ilves.

"International law, and in particular the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the understanding that justice will be done, no matter how long it takes, are the tools we possess to prevent the worst human rights violations.

"Rule of law and respect for international law are what will help ravaged and victimized societies regain their dignity and rebuild their communities," he said, adding that working with the ICC was a priority for the Eastern European nation.

The ICC was established after 120 countries adopted the so-called Rome Statute in 1998, calling for the creation of a permanent, independent court to try those accused of the worst war crimes. It is based in The Hague in the Netherlands.

In 2005, UN Member States attending the World Summit agreed on the validity of the responsibility to protect for four types of crimes: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

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