region, and that the Security Council was not the place to discuss the internal affairs of a state. Although China and Russia acknowledged that Burma was facing a serious human rights and humanitarian situation, they emphasised that the Human Rights Council, which has no binding powers, was the best venue for action on Burma. The vetoing countries made no reference to any collective responsibility to protect the population of Burma.

In September 2007, the largest pro-democracy demonstrations in two decades rocked Burma and the subsequent government crackdown made the country the focus of renewed international attention. Following intense diplomatic pressure, the SPDC allowed the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser and the Special Rapporteur into the country in late 2007. After much wrangling, the Security Council passed a presidential statement deploiring the violence against peaceful demonstrators and calling for a genuine dialogue with all concerned parties and ethnic groups to achieve an inclusive national reconciliation. There was no mention of the protection of ethnic minority civilians who have experienced decades of violence and forcible displacement, and who may be continuing to experience extreme danger and hardship.

Although the crackdown on Burmese democracy activists appears to have diminished, government forces are continuing to target civilians in Burma’s ethnic minority areas as part of their counter-insurgency tactics and are committing human rights violations with impunity. There is concern that as memories of the ‘Saffron Revolution’ fade and the Burmese government makes token gestures of permitting a political dialogue, the Security Council will once again view Burma as a low priority, more appropriate for other UN bodies to tackle. It is imperative that the Security Council start to see Burma in terms of the R2P scenario.

If the R2P concept can be brought up in the Security Council in the case of Darfur, there is every reason for it to be raised in connection with Burma. International divisions may make progress difficult but if Security Council members continue to ignore the international community’s obligation to ensure the protection of civilians from mass atrocity crimes in Burma they will be setting a very poor precedent for a responsibility which all governments have agreed upon in principle.

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2. Formerly known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).