The international community of states promised “never again” would they be bystanders when moral atrocities are committed against innocent civilians following the United Nations’ failure to intervene robustly in Rwanda to prevent or halt the genocide. British prime minister Tony Blair promised that “if Rwanda happens again we would not walk away as the outside has done many times before,” and insisted that international society had a “moral duty” to protect civilians from atrocities.¹ The United Nations’ abysmal response to the Rwandese genocide weakened the faith the global community had in its commitment to protect civilians in violent civil wars. The organization thus acquired the stigma of moral failure and cowardice in the face of evil. Secretary-General Kofi Annan described the United Nations’ inaction as a “sin of omission.”² Fear of its operational paralysis and concomitant declining legitimacy and reputation gained primacy in subsequent UN debates. Discussions fixated on the United Nations’ efficacy to fulfill its obligation of civilian protection against moral atrocities. This ignited the reform processes culminating in the development of international protective norms such as the “responsibility to protect” that transforms sovereignty as a right to a responsibility. Responsibility to protect obliges states to protect their citizens from avoidable catastrophe, but failure to act triggers international obligation to ensure that the dignity of the human person is respected using all necessary means, including force. These reformative developments marked the rebirth of heightened optimism and expectations of the United Nations’ fulfillment of its civilian protection obligations. Darfur massacres tested the United Nations’ commitment to civilian protection against egregious
human rights violations. Unfortunately, the world failed to go beyond “never again” rhetoric to protect Darfurians despite overwhelming evidence of atrocities that met the thresholds that trigger robust intervention. Governments that overwhelmingly endorsed the international norm of “responsibility to protect” willfully ignored their moral duty to protect Darfurians caught in the throes of violations by their own government and willful allies, the Janjaweed. The United States called the Darfur killings genocide and the United Nations and Western nations described it as the “most serious humanitarian emergency.” Other NGOs, such as Physicians for Human Rights and Justice Africa, called the crisis genocide. The UN Security Council, the EU, and a variety of NGOs (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch)—all acknowledged the complicity of the Sudanese government in large-scale crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing in Darfur. The Sudanese president El Bashir and his cronies have subsequently been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity that are criteria for humanitarian intervention. UN concern about the situation in Darfur was strongly expressed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan when he cautioned the United Nations against inaction in a speech before the UN Human Rights Commission on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. Annan said that events in Darfur left him “with a deep sense of foreboding. Whatever terms it uses to describe the situation, the international community cannot stand idly by...[but] must be prepared to take swift and appropriate action. By action in such situations I mean a continuum of steps, which may include military action.” Despite the overwhelming evidence of crimes against humanity, complicity of the Sudanese government, and global demand for robust intervention, the international community failed to contemplate this action. Darfurians were cheekily handed a hybrid mission that lacked the political will and capacity to stop the massacres. One thorny question is why the world denied Darfurians a robust response as happened in Iraq and Kosovo, where the severity of killings paled in comparison to those in Darfur.

Darfur exposed serious shortfalls in the United Nations’ ability to use force and political will to halt ethnic cleansing and protect civilians. It demonstrated that UN ambitions to robustly protect civilians in violent conflicts is hampered by the neorealist national interests of the five major powers of the Security Council that determine protective interventionist decisions. The UN response to Darfur killings reveals that decisions for humanitarian interventions to protect civilians are grounded in national interests rather than genuine altruism. Interventions to protect civilians are purely and politically motivated by the neorealist interests of the P-5. Politicization of humanitarianism in the Security Council has hijacked