

The New York Times

Recent U.N. Actions Show Policy Shift, Analysts Say

By DAN BILEFSKY, April 5, 2011



Issouf Sanogo/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Residents passed a burned car in Abidjan, the main city of Ivory Coast, on Tuesday. Most people did not leave their homes.

UNITED NATIONS — The unusual military strikes by the **United Nations** against military bases of the **Ivory Coast**'s strongman, **Laurent Gbagbo**, represent a seminal moment in which an organization generally disinclined to intervene forcefully in the affairs of member states is showing a new willingness to take bold action to save lives, diplomats and analysts said.

After weeks of the United Nations' equivocating, Alain Le Roy, head of the organization's **peacekeeping** operations, on Monday night framed the decision to intervene both as a moral choice and military and legal imperative: Mr. Gbagbo should be stopped from using mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns against civilians and international peacekeepers. Secretary General **Ban Ki-moon** also said intervention was necessary to protect lives, even as he sought to emphasize that the United Nations was not a party to the conflict.

While both officials stressed the encroaching urgency on the ground, United Nations diplomats and analysts said Tuesday that the organization's intervention also was part of a fundamental political shift in which military action against Libya — backed by two Security Council resolutions and the vocal support of the Obama administration — had provided an important spur.

They said Libya had at least temporarily eclipsed some of the divisive debates of the past about whether humanitarian intervention could be viewed as a guise for imperialism. In stressing the United Nations' supporting role, Mr. Ban chose his words carefully for fear of feeding into a claim by Mr. Gbagbo, that **Alassane Ouattara**, the man

who beat him in elections last year and is battling to assume the presidency, is a tool of the French.

“The action in the Ivory Coast was given a psychological lift by the fact that it is happening against the backdrop of Libya, and supports Mr. Obama’s narrative that intervention is justified in some cases,” said a senior United Nations diplomat close to the discussions on the Ivory Coast, who requested anonymity because he is not authorized to speak on the matter.

Nick Birnback, a spokesman for the United Nations’ Department of Peacekeeping, said in an interview that the action in the Ivory Coast was “unusual but not unprecedented.” Mr. Birnback cited other examples of intervention, including action taken by United Nations peacekeepers against narco-gangs in Haiti.

Yet Mr. Birnback said that the Ivory Coast action showed the extent to which the United Nations’ legal and moral commitment to protect civilians now held sway over key permanent Security Council members, including France, Britain and the United States. Diplomats noted that even Russia and China, which in the past have avoided interfering in the domestic affairs of sovereign nations, were persuaded to support the resolution on the Ivory Coast and also did not veto military action in Libya.

The emerging consensus to take action to prevent violence against civilians should be viewed against the backdrop of a resolution adopted in 2005 to help the United Nations intervene to stop genocide. The resolution held nations responsible for shielding citizens from atrocities and established the right of international forces to step in if nations did not fulfill this “responsibility to protect.”

The resolution was supposed to overcome debates within the organization between those who argue that the international community has the right to intervene to prevent atrocities and those who say the concept of state sovereignty, recognized in the United Nations Charter, is sacrosanct.

“There is a new trend in the Security Council in which the responsibility to protect principle is gaining a new hold,” said Stéphane Crouzat, spokesman for the French mission to the United Nations. Invoking past conflicts in Rwanda, Darfur and Bosnia, he added: “There is a desire to intervene before war crimes or ethnic cleansing can take place.”