



United States Institute of Peace

...

Second Annual Conference: "Preventing Violent Conflict"

June 1, 2011

PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Keynote Address by Gareth Evans, President Emeritus, International Crisis Group, Chancellor, Australian National University, and former Australian Foreign Minister, to USIP Second Annual Conference on Preventing Violent Conflict, Washington DC, 1 June 2011

Conflict prevention is not a business for the faint of heart, those looking for quick returns, or congenital pessimists. Looking out at the world around us, it is difficult for anyone following current events to believe at first glance that we have really learned anything much at all about conflict prevention and resolution, or that any of us in this business – whether governments, or intergovernmental organizations, or NGOs or research institutes and think tanks – are making any kind of difference.

But my basic story is that when it comes to preventing violent conflict at all three basic stages of the conflict cycle – preventing its outbreak, preventing its continuation, and preventing its recurrence – we are doing better than we have in the past, and better than most people believe. And if we absorb and apply the half dozen or so main lessons we should by now have clearly learned in each of these areas, which I will now sketch out, we can do better still.

It is a tall order to say anything new on this subject to an audience as knowledgeable and sophisticated as this and I make no claim that I will. But maybe a simple stocktake of what we know – or ought to know – from our experience since the end of the Cold War, has its own utility, and will be a useful starting point for the more detailed discussions to follow. And maybe it will do something for our collective morale. We *have* learned a lot, and how we have put in practice what we have learned has been making a positive impact.

Preventing Conflict Outbreak

The first rule for preventing violent conflict is, of course, don't start it. This is a message the U.S. has had cause to ponder long and hard after its rush to war in Iraq in 2003, and certainly

seems to have absorbed in the context of taking any preemptive military action against Iran, or encouraging or allowing Israel to do so, preferring – I think wisely – to rely on good old-fashioned containment and deterrence combined with a willingness to keep the door open for negotiations.

There are circumstances, however, in which there will simply be no alternative to taking coercive military action, certainly to respond to real and immediate cross-border threats (as in the case of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991), and certainly in cases of genuine self-defence, as Afghanistan was in the beginning even if by now, as the conflict has dragged on, that rationale has lost most of its force. And there is now a third context in which military force may be perfectly defensible – that of the international 'responsibility to protect' those, within the borders of a sovereign state, at risk of genocide and other mass atrocity crimes, the issue raised squarely for us by events in Libya and the wider Middle East.

The short point for present purposes is that coercive military actions should only ever be undertaken in the most serious and unequivocal cases, as a last resort, and in circumstances where it will do more good than harm. In the case of Libya, I have no doubt that those conditions were satisfied in March; that they fully justified the Security Council resolution that month authorizing far reaching (but not unlimited) military action for civilian protection purposes; and that they did in fact prevent a massacre in Benghazi. But I am now concerned, like a number of others, that the NATO operation – understandably impatient to avoid a protracted stalemate – will stretch its UN mandate to breaking point. And I fear in that respect that so far from Libya consolidating a new, and long overdue, international consensus as to when it *is* right to fight in the context of mass atrocities, it may unless we work very hard prove to be the high water mark from which the tide will now recede.

The second rule of conflict prevention is to understand the causes: the factors at work – political, economic, cultural, personal – in each particular risk situation. The basic point about conflict is that it is always context specific. Big overarching theories – whether cast in terms of clash of civilizations, ancient tribal enmity, economic greed, economic grievance, or anything else – may be good for keynote speeches, and are certainly good for academic royalties. They may also be quite helpful in identifying particular explanatory factors that should certainly be taken into account in trying to understand the dynamics of particular situations. But they never seem to work very well in sorting between those situations which are combustible and those which are not. For that you need detailed, case by case analysis, not making assumptions on the basis of experience elsewhere, or what has gone before, but looking at what is under your nose, right now.

That has perhaps been the real strength of the International Crisis Group, whose distinctive methodology is founded on field-based reporting and analysis, on the premise that everything starts with an accurate take on what is happening on the ground, the issues that are resonating and the personalities and forces that are driving them. For a variety of reasons, mainly security and budgetary, traditional diplomats are not performing this function in as much breadth and depth as they traditionally have – it's hard to get out and about when you are locked up in a fortress or have minimal staff resources – and both early warning and effective conflict prevention capacity have become more at risk as a result. This is a gap that Crisis Group (and it

is now by no means alone in this respect) has been widely seen as very successful in filling, not least because we have always been prepared to complexify our analysis in situations where to simplify it would be just simplistic, however helpful for wider communication a very simple story might be.

The third big lesson we have learned about conflict prevention is the need to fully understand the conflict prevention toolbox, and be prepared to apply flexibly as circumstances change the whole range of possible measures, that can be deployed to deal with high-risk situations, again not shirking a complex response if that is what is required. The easiest way of getting one's head around the options available in any given situation is to think, literally, of a toolbox, and one with two trays – for long term structural prevention and short term more direct operational measures respectively. Each tray in turn has four basic compartments for, respectively, political and diplomatic measures, legal and constitutional measures, economic and social measures, and security sector and military measures. And there are sub-compartments within each of these – to take just the economic area, for focused humanitarian aid, positive incentives like an infrastructure support package, and negative incentives or sanctions.

The crucial thing is to recognise not only that each situation has its own characteristics, and that one-size wrenches don't fit all, but that each situation is likely to require a complex combination of measures, the balance between which is bound to change over time as circumstances evolve. Burma/Myanmar now may be a good example of a need for a fundamental rethink of the right tools to apply, with the longstanding Western focus on coercive sanctions bearing, in the absence of comparable regional pressure, no obvious fruit in changing the military regime's inward-looking, undemocratic, authoritarianism.

A fourth rule of effective conflict prevention is to be prepared to work without recognition. In diplomacy, as in life itself, more can often be achieved by allowing others credit for whatever is achieved, or by nobody seeking overt acknowledgment, than by a competitive clamour for attention. Third party diplomacy, be it governmental, intergovernmental or private, to prevent the threatened initial outbreak of conflict or mass violence is most successful when nothing happens, and nobody notices – which is one of the reasons it is so hard to mobilize. As I can testify after 21 years in Australian government and politics, for most people in public office, performing good works without anyone noticing it is like having your teeth pulled without anaesthetic.

One of the best examples anywhere of unheralded but extraordinarily effective preventive activity remains the heroic mediation effort of the OSCE's High Commissioner for National Minorities over many years, particularly during the volatile early post-Cold War period when Max van der Stoep held the post, to quietly stop as many as a dozen major ethnic and language-based conflicts from breaking out across Central and Eastern Europe, from the Baltics to Romania – using essentially the political, legal and constitutional sub-compartments of the conflict prevention toolbox to find solutions acceptable to both majorities and minorities.

The fifth rule is to be prepared to commit the necessary resources, governmental and intergovernmental, when and where they are needed, and particularly at the early prevention stage, where any investment now is likely to be infinitely cheaper than paying later for military

action, humanitarian relief assistance and post-conflict reconstruction - something the international community is still much better at talking about than doing.

Preventing Continuation: Conflict Resolution

When efforts to prevent the outbreak of conflict fails, the task becomes that of preventing its continuation, or conflict resolution – hopefully achieved by peacemaking negotiations rather than the use of overriding military force. In this context, again, there are a number of lessons we have painfully learned about what makes a successful peace accord.

First, peacemaking requires, as does earlier conflict prevention effort, the commitment of serious diplomatic resources, both in quality and quantity, at whatever level is most likely to bring success – through the UN, through a regional organization, through a particular government initiative, or sometimes through second-track or unofficial mechanisms. At the UN level the crucial role is played by the dozens of special representatives or envoys of the Secretary General who, it has been rightly said, need a combination of “excellent political, negotiation, leadership and management skills” combined with a “a superabundance of optimism, persistence and patience.”

A problem in the past has been that the UN’s selection process for such special representatives was largely ad hoc and informal, with it being almost entirely a matter of chance whether any of these qualities exist, let alone all of them: one representative has confessed that he almost certainly found himself top of the list for a post for which he was, on the face of it, only marginally qualified (although in which, in fact, he performed excellently) because his surname began with “A.” Good selection is only the beginning. It must be accompanied by carefully designed and implemented training, and practitioners going into the field have to have first class initial briefing, and ongoing advice and assistance. The good news is that the UN now has an increasingly professional and well resourced Mediation Support Unit, and has been devoting very systematic attention in recent years (particularly in the work of Connie Peck at UNITAR, who has just published a very useful *Manual for UN Mediators*) to capturing and passing on the lessons learned by some of the most skilled practitioners of the conflict negotiation art.

Second, successful peace negotiating requires creativity and stamina, and a willingness to work with all the players that matter, however ugly their past behaviour may have been. The successful Cambodian peace process of 1989-93, in which both Dick Solomon and I played a part, depended on us being prepared to talk face to face with the leadership of the Khmer Rouge: not an experience that I can, to this day, recall without shuddering, but a necessary one. I well understand the political constraints that stand in the way of this sort of thing, but I can’t help believing that the U.S. would be much closer to finding a sustainable solution to the Iranian nuclear problem if conversations by Washington officials with Iranians had not been limited – as they presently tend to be – to chance encounters with émigré taxi drivers. And I suspect it would have a rather different take on the capacity and willingness of Hamas to play something other than a totally destructive role in the Israel-Palestine if leaders like Khaled Mashaal were regular interlocutors.

A third lesson we have learned is that peacemaking is not an event so much as a process, and signing the agreement is not the end of it. The critical need is to generate commitment to, and ownership of, the peace by the warring parties: so their commitments are not just formal, but internalized, and will stick. That takes, in turn, real skill and commitment on the part of those mediating or otherwise assisting the negotiation. There have been innumerable shortfalls in that respect in the past – with a continuing painful one being South Africa and SADC’s failure to make any kind of decent process stick in Zimbabwe, but the handling of the extraordinarily fragile North-South Sudan peace process through to the recent successful referendum (albeit that some acute problems remain in the Abyei and other border areas) gives us some hope that that we are slowly learning how to do these things better.

Fourth, we know that any peace accord must deal with all the fundamentals of the dispute: all the issues which will have to be resolved if normality is to return. Sometimes that can be done in a sequential or stage-by-stage way, with confidence building measures now and some key issues deferred: but the failed Oslo process for Israel-Palestine, and its multiple attempted reincarnations since, shows how risky that approach can be, with progress forever hostage to the last extremist on either side.

Fifth, any successful peace accord must get the balance right between peace and justice. This is a lot easier said than done. The South African truth and reconciliation commission model, with its amnesties for the perpetrators of even the most serious crimes if they were both frank and repentant, remains very widely admired (even if the practice there by no means consistently followed the principle). But in other cases sustainable peace will not be possible without significant retributive justice: i.e. the visible trial and punishment of those most guilty. What is clear is that the people of every country, whether it’s Cambodia or Rwanda or East Timor or Liberia, have to resolve what works for them.

Reconciling the competing demands of peace and justice often confronts those trying to negotiate an end to an ongoing conflict with a cruel dilemma: do you insist (as formal UN guidelines evidently require) on no impunity for the worst human rights violators, but then risk the conflict continuing with all the further major loss of life and immiseration that conflict brings with it?. Or do give them – as the price of the conflict coming to an end - a soft landing of some kind? The asylum given by Nigeria to Liberia’s villainous Charles Taylor in 2003 was entirely defensible, given the prospect then looming of a bloody final battle for Monrovia. What I think was much less defensible – though human rights organizations are hard to persuade about this – was Nigeria’s later decision, under strong international pressure, to hand Taylor over for trial in the Sierra Leone Special Court: this sent a message to other dictators (not least Robert Mugabe) that amnesty deals were not to be trusted, and has made the job of peace negotiators everywhere that much harder.

The peace v. justice issue has loomed large in Northern Uganda, where the LRA leader Joseph Kony, has been indicted by the International Criminal Court, but has continued to elude capture; and Sudan, where President Omar al-Bashir has been indicted for his behaviour in Darfur, but again the conflict is no closer to resolution. And now it is looming again in the case of Libya, if the indictment now sought by the ICC Prosecutor against Muammar Gaddafi is issued and proves to complicate a possible negotiated exit scenario. My own view of these issues is that

peace sometimes should take precedence over justice, but only in the most exceptional cases where there is clear and unequivocal evidence that there will be a major peace dividend; I don't think that was the case in Uganda or Sudan, but it may well prove to be in Libya.

Sixth, the terms of any accord, and in particular the method of its enforcement and implementation, must be sufficiently resilient to deal with spoilers – those who would seek to undermine or overturn it. That has been a constant problem in most of the peace settlements in Africa and elsewhere that have not held, or which remain incomplete. At least since the Brahimi report a decade ago UN peacekeeping missions have been armed with much better mandates to respond to violent spoilers, although those mandates have not always been accompanied by the resources and operational effectiveness their execution has required.

Seventh – and this follows particularly from the last point – a peace accord to be successful must have the necessary degree of international support: with all the guarantees and commitment of resources that are necessary to make it stick. And this leads us to the last set of lessons I want to discuss.

Preventing Recurrence: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding

The biggest lesson of all about the handling of conflict that we have learned in recent years - not least from Rwanda (where the 1994 genocide, taking 800 000 lives, followed the Arusha peace deal just a year before), Angola (where the 1991 Bicesse Agreement to end the war in was followed by a relapse into bloody conflict for another decade with another million or more lives lost), Haiti, Afghanistan and Iraq – is the critical necessity of effective post-conflict peacebuilding, to ensure that the whole weary conflict cycle does not begin again. One of the things we now understand most clearly about conflict is that the countries and regions most likely to lapse into it are those that have been there before. In the 1990s some 45 per cent of peace settlements broke down within five years – figures even worse than in previous decades – but in the first years of the new century the success rate has been considerably better, with a success rate closer to 85 per cent

Negotiators trying to put together international peacebuilding missions that won't fall apart, and those then charged with holding them together, are I think now very conscious of five basic imperatives, and are getting better at delivering them in practice. They can be stated very succinctly:

First, sort out who should do what and when - immediately, over a medium transition period and in the longer term: allocate the roles and coordinate them effectively both at headquarters and on the ground. Of all the things that have gone wrong in Afghanistan, among the most serious have been weaknesses on this front – poor coordination among all the international players (between military and military, civilian and civilian, and military and civilian) and as between them and the Afghan government.

Second, commit the necessary resources, and sustain that commitment for as long as it takes: there has been a long and lamentable history of ad hoc donors' conferences, accompanied by rapidly waning attention, and generosity, once the immediate crisis is over, with Afghanistan and

Haiti being particularly classic past cases of international players bringing conflicts to an end but then dropping the ball. But in recent years donor commitment to peacekeeping and peacebuilding seems to have been pretty well-sustained, notwithstanding the global financial crisis, and the Peacebuilding Commission seems to be gradually finding its feet as a new institutional vehicle expressly designed to keeping more donor and policymaker focus than might otherwise be the case directed at very difficult continuing situations like Burundi

Third, understand the local political dynamics – and the cultural and other limits within outsiders must operate. Iraq and Afghanistan are both unhappy major examples of how much can go wrong when that understanding is lacking, and there are many others about which Crisis Group has written.

Fourth, recognise that multiple objectives have to be pursued simultaneously: physical security may always be the first priority, but it cannot be the only one, and rule of law and justice issues, and economic governance and anti-corruption measures, deserve much higher priority than they have usually been given. Afghanistan is perhaps again the best and clearest recent example, where the international efforts to help create an effective police and court system in particular have been, at least until very recently, hopelessly and lamentably inadequate.

Fifth, all intrusive peace operations need an exit strategy, if not an exit timetable, and one that is not just devoted to holding elections as soon as possible, as important as it obviously is to vest real authority and responsibility in the people of the country being rebuilt. Every peacebuilding situation has its own dynamic, but many of the worst peacebuilding mistakes of the last decade and a half have had more to do with leaving too soon, or doing too little, than staying too long or doing too much. In the event the exit strategy in Iraq seems to have been reasonably managed; but the Afghanistan situation, unless there can be dramatic improvements on the ground over the next two years, seems much more likely to end in tears.

Preventing and Resolving Deadly Conflict: The Case for Optimism

To finish on a cheerier note, for all that things continue to go wrong, and not come right as far and fast as we would like, it is worth reminding ourselves that things have been going much better than most professionals, and certainly most publics, seem to think.

The evidence comes from the statistics that have in recent years been meticulously compiled, drawing on the best available worldwide data (not much of which is available from UN or other official sources) by the Human Security Report team under Andrew Mack now working out of Simon Fraser University in Canada, and published in successive reports since 2005, most recently in the 2009/10 Report, now online in almost final form, and shortly about to be published in print.

Since the early 1990s, despite all the terrible cases we all remember, and all the terrible cases still ongoing in the Congo and elsewhere, there has been an extraordinary decrease in the number of wars, the number of episodes of mass killing, and the number of people dying violent battle deaths. In the case of serious conflicts (defined as those with 1000 or more reported battle deaths in a year) and mass killings there has been an 80 per cent decline since the early '90s. Though a

number of significant new conflicts did commence, and a number of apparently successfully concluded conflicts did break out again within a few years – though less recently than in the 1990s – many more conflicts have stopped than started.

There has even more striking decrease in the number of battle deaths. Whereas most years from the 1940s through to the 1990s had over 100,000 such reported deaths – and sometimes as many as 500,000 – the average for the first years of this new century has been fewer than 20,000.

Even more encouraging is the analysis which lies behind these figures. The dramatic decline in wars and battle deaths is partly explained by the end of the era of colonialism, which generated two-thirds or more of all wars from the 1950s to the 1980s; and of course partly also by the end of the Cold War, which – although its immediate result was more conflict rather than less in the Balkans and elsewhere – meant that there were no more proxy wars fuelled by Washington or Moscow and the

But, as Mack and his team conclude, with more sustained argumentation and evidence in the present report than its predecessors, the best explanation is simply the massive increase in international activism – across the whole spectrum of conflict prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict peacebuilding activity – that has occurred over the last decade and a half, with most of this being spearheaded by the UN itself. Many more conflicts have been negotiated to conclusion than have newly erupted; there has been a tenfold increase from 1991 to 2007 in the number of ‘Friends of the Secretary General’, contact groups and other political arrangements that support peacemaking and follow-on initiatives; and as well as a threefold increase in the number of peace operations overall – with more than thirty now underway around the world – there has been a nine-fold increase from 1989 to 2008 in the number of post-conflict operations specifically focusing on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. And beyond the UN, a number of regional organizations, individual states, and literally thousands of NGOs – including I hope my own International Crisis Group, which did not exist before 1995 – have played significant roles of their own.

So those of us who have been devoting large chunks of our professional and personal lives to preventing and resolving deadly conflict my final message is clear, simple and I hope encouraging: we are not all wasting our time.