

Tackling Conflicts, Failed States and Terrorism

Does the international community have effective arrangements in place to lessen conflict and to bring peace to conflict-ridden countries and order back to failed states? In answering these questions, it is useful to start by reviewing the causes of conflict and the collapse of states.

4.1 Why Do Conflicts Occur? What Causes the Phenomenon of ‘Failed States’?

It is tempting to think that conflict is inevitable in societies marked by ethnic divisions, but the evidence suggests that ethnic identities are as much created and reinforced by conflicts as an original cause of them. Commenting on the roots of conflict, the World Bank observes:

Colonial rulers and local politicians have often manipulated ethnic tensions for private gain, sometimes leading to gruesome civil wars. Inflaming ethnic tensions and civil unrest is a frequent strategy for gaining and keeping power in these circumstances, since it justifies expanding brutal military forces while undermining the capacity of opposition groups demanding reform. Over time, ethnic minorities, especially facing discrimination, inequality, or conflict, can become ethno-classes, groups whose ethnicity-based sensibilities and demands become independent causes of conflict.

World Bank (2001), p. 127

Is conflict linked to poverty? As we have seen from the experience of Nazi Germany, former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, communal hatred and deep and violent conflicts can occur in rich as well in poor countries. It is not true to say that conflict is inevitable in poor societies. Not all poor countries are conflict-ridden. Rather, conflict seems to be driven by a sense of injustice, as elites capture wealth and income through predatory behaviour (see Section 5 below which discusses lapses from democracy and good governance as causes of poverty). The decline in incomes from external causes – such as the fall in commodity prices – may then deepen such conflicts as elites lose the capacity to buy off the poor, and the poor bear a disproportionate share of the burden of falling incomes. Democracies, it is contended, are much more likely to survive in wealthy societies.²⁰

The poor may come under pressure not only because of the predatory behaviour of ruling elites, but also because of the structural adjustment programmes that cut deep into

social safety nets and compress public educational and health budgets under the pressure of fiscal rectitude. The tensions and conflicts arising from such a change can become explosive if the divide between gainers and losers from economic reform overlaps with social divides marked by ethnic or regional identity.

Lack of effective democracy and strong civil society organisations – for example chambers of commerce, trade unions, professional groups, sports clubs and women’s associations – that promote engagement between different communities and peaceful mediation in conflict situations can then accentuate conflicts rooted in injustice and lack of good governance.²¹

The marginalisation of young men, through lack of opportunities for schooling, further education and activities such as sports and culture seems to lead to violence. This applies to rich, as well as poor, societies, when race or religion isolates the young from full participation in the societies in which they live.

Mineral-exporting countries seem to be particularly prone to predatory behaviour – as people find it easy to lay their hands on income that flows from sources such as oil, diamonds and the like in a non-transparent way. However, as we have seen from the experience of Botswana and elsewhere, this is not inevitable: much depends upon the quality of leadership a country enjoys.

Some scholars have noted, for example, that the increase in intra-state conflicts and humanitarian emergencies in Africa in the last two decades of the twentieth-century was linked to its negative per capita growth in the 1970s and 1980s and virtual stagnation in the 1990s.²² It can be argued that the absence of effective political space for dialogue (that is, democracy), good governance and participatory processes for development make it more likely that stagnation results in conflict, rather than economic stagnation *per se*.

In parallel to the rise in intra-state conflicts, state collapse also became a more frequent phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s. While the fragmentation of society and the destruction of institutions of government that internal conflicts bring about can be a powerful cause of state collapse, the loss of legitimacy arising from the predatory behaviour of ruling groups, and the running of the state into the ground by corrupt leaders and officials, can also be potent causes of state collapse.

Once anarchy sets in, the economic interests of the marauding militia can be a powerful factor in perpetuating a state of collapse, as has been seen in Sierra Leone and elsewhere. As the World Bank has noted:

In most countries where the state has collapsed, there are forces that have an interest in perpetuating a state of anarchy, whose unbridled pursuit of riches or power would be constrained by a state with the capability to make rules, collect revenue and enforce the law. ... Civil warfare in these countries has its roots in political or ethnic rivalries, but it has gradually shifted character and is now centred around the control of economic assets, which provide the source of financing for war and for private

enrichment.

World Bank (1997)

If such are the roots of conflict and the phenomenon of 'failed states', then clearly the promotion of inclusive political processes, good governance, strong civil society and careful management of economic reforms assume central importance in reducing conflict. But to set in train such processes for long-term peace building, one needs to have in the first instance conflict resolution and post-conflict stabilisation mechanisms in place in the countries currently affected by conflict.

4.2 The Adequacy of Current International Arrangements

In the last decade, with the end of the Cold War, the global community has edged towards new solutions for securing peace and bringing a sense of humanity to tackling global problems. These include:

- Extension by the UN Security Council of the concept of 'threats to the peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression' to allow it to take action under Chapter VII, the enforcement chapter of the UN. Steps taken under this included action to restrain Iraq's *future* behaviour that might threaten peace, and the establishment of safe havens and no-fly zones to protect the Kurdish population in Iraq;
- A sharp increase in UN peace-keeping missions in parallel with the UN Security Council's extension of the concept of the threat to peace;
- The use of the word 'humanitarian' in more and more UN Security Council resolutions that deal with the effects or the residue of war;
- The adoption of an international ban on land-mines;
- The establishment of the International Criminal Court and, separately and prior to it, the war crimes tribunals in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.²³

While all these steps represent a changing global community response, some of them still lack universality (for example the US has failed to ratify the International Criminal Court, nor have all countries as yet signed the ban on land mines. Overall, the ability of the international community to intervene in conflict situations and restore peace remains limited.

The driving principle behind the UN's operations is that it cannot intervene in internal conflicts unless invited to do so. Nor does the UN have a well-developed position to deal with failed states. The recent international efforts to contain conflicts and assist post-conflict reconstruction have been undertaken both within and outside the framework of the UN.

It is also pointed out that while the UN has been increasingly thrust into dealing with post-conflict situations in places such as Cambodia, Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra

Leone, the major member states of the UN have been reluctant to grant it the capacity it needs if it is to accomplish much on the ground.

Several observers have noted that the UN's operations in the area of peace-building and peace-keeping are invariably *ad hoc*. Action often comes too late, local human resources are frequently neglected and a lack of public order and personal security often frustrate its operations. The Brahimi Report of 2000 on UN peace-building and peace-keeping revealingly concluded that 'over the last decade the United Nations has repeatedly failed to meet the challenge; and cannot do any better today'.

The failure to respond to the genocide in Rwanda in the early 1990s, in which nearly one million people perished,²⁴ speaks loudly of the international community's inability to deal systematically with conflict and genocide.

In addition, the UN has no direct mandate to promote democratic as against other forms of government. It has no legitimate means of exercising pressure against military dictatorships or authoritarian regimes.

The Commonwealth, as a global sub-system, has been involved in conflict resolution at the request of member countries. The Commonwealth Secretary-General's good offices have been increasingly invoked to help resolve conflicts and restore democracy. The Commonwealth's capacity in this regard, however, is limited by a lack of resources and support for requisite institutional capacities.

There have been several regional and bilateral initiatives to help resolve conflicts and bring peace in Palestine, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere. These have met with patchy success. The US-led operations to combat terrorism in Afghanistan have succeeded in bringing about a change of regime and peace-building is underway.

Perhaps the most salutary success the international community has seen – and can take some credit for – is the transition in Sierra Leone from conflict and a breakdown of social order to successful elections in May 2002 and peace thereafter. While the UN has been involved, much of the credit for this success goes to regional and bilateral efforts, including importantly Britain and Nigeria – both members of the Commonwealth – who have made a difference to the situation on the ground through committed and sustained involvement.

The emergence of East Timor as an independent nation is another example of successful international intervention.

The experience in regard to the international community's ability to deal with conflict situations and restore peace is thus marked by some successes – but also by many failures. Part of the reason for failure is the intractable situation that prevails in many conflict-ridden countries, despite the best international will. Somalia is an example of this.

It has been argued that for peace efforts to succeed, it is critical to secure a change, either voluntarily or through the use of force, in the perception of ruling elites in conflict-

ridden countries, so that they come to believe that it is in their interests to work to build democratic societies in which the rule of law prevails and economic enterprise succeeds.

How can such a change be brought about? Can the international community take any action in this regard?

One may argue that peer pressure and the threat of sanctions against the ruling elites – such as a ban on travel, exclusion from international meetings and councils, seizure of assets held abroad by members of corrupt regimes (measures the Commonwealth contemplated in the context of Abacha's Nigeria) – could have a significant impact on the perceptions of rent-seeking elites. While these punitive measures are important, and their scope needs to be strengthened, the promise of positive measures of help may also create incentives for change.

Post-conflict assistance such as stipends for disarming soldiers, assistance for returning refugees and internally displaced people, building up police, judicial and other capacities within governments and restoration of infrastructures in such areas as transport, power, health and education, can play a significant role in restoring peace. So too can help in setting up capacities for local government and other democratic processes; in this institutions such as electoral commissions can play a huge role. However, if these efforts are to be successful, they must be linked to a degree of optimism that economic growth is possible. While improved opportunities for enterprise and productive engagement will to a large extent depend upon domestic measures, substantial outside assistance will be required in sustaining post-conflict stabilisation and return to normalcy.

The issue of failed states also raises difficult questions of international law, and how to mount sustained operations until the institutions of government and democratic political order are restored or established. In the absence of well-established ground rules for this, the responsibility for intervention in failed states is increasingly falling under the leadership of the US as the world super power, often outside the framework of the UN decision-making, eroding multilateral responsibility for global action. An issue for discussion is, therefore: how can multilateralism be strengthened in dealing with situations of failed states, terrorism and deep conflict? Is there, for example, scope for reviving the concept of UN trusteeship to deal with failed states? Can regional organisations, which may be closer to realities on the ground, assume such responsibilities?

4.3 Terrorism

It was noted earlier that the persistence of deep poverty and a sense of injustice are fertile grounds for conflict, and that conflict-ridden situations and failed states can become sanctuaries for terrorists. As terrorism becomes enmeshed with drug trafficking, the arms trade, money laundering and illegal smuggling of people across borders, it can perpetuate deep poverty on the one hand and authoritarian rule on the other.

While poverty as such is not a cause of terrorism, it can constitute a rich recruiting ground for terrorists – as we have seen in the context of Afghanistan. Poor people

become prey to false propaganda and promises.

Are the current international efforts adequate in suppressing terrorism?

In the wake of the events of September 11, UN Security Council Resolution 1373 imposed binding obligations on all states to suppress and prevent terrorism, cut off funds and prevent access to weapons to terrorists, and to co-operate at judicial level. Resolution 1373 also established the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) to monitor the implementation of the measures imposed, and each state is required to report to the CTC on the steps it has taken to implement the resolution.

On 25 October 2001, Commonwealth Heads of Government also condemned 'any nation which harbours, supports or provides assistance to terrorist activity'.

These measures, and the intervention in Afghanistan, have heightened the priority attached by the global community to fighting terrorism. There is also some evidence that terrorist groups, confronted with a much more hostile international environment, are losing support in their constituencies and are willing to start dialogue – if only as a tactic for buying time until the international situation cools off.

The effective combating of terrorism requires not only national action, but also enhanced international co-operation involving intelligence sharing, tracking and confiscation of the financial assets of terrorists, prevention of sale and transport of weapons of all kinds and a commitment not to harbour terrorists. However, the lack of a clear-cut definition of what constitutes terrorism, and the lack of adequate intelligence, technical capacity and adequate channels of international co-operation continue to hamper the efforts to suppress terrorism. The unwillingness of some states to deny sanctuary to terrorists also continues to be a problem. The failure of some states to effectively regulate the trade in arms is also a factor in perpetuating terrorism.