

Stopping the slide back into war

UN peacebuilding body launched Aims to provide stable future for at-risk states

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War and peace are seen as absolute opposites, separated by an uncrossable line in the sand.

But in the past 20 years, nearly half the wars that were officially declared over have swept back again, dragging millions of innocent people into their undertow.

"Losing the peace" is an increasingly common slogan, as strife-torn countries like Iraq teeter on the brink of civil war, and the international community's lack of planning is blamed for large-scale death and displacement in countries where it has tried to intervene.

Last month, the United Nations took a historic step toward ending that catastrophic cycle, by passing resolutions to form a new Peacebuilding Commission which, says UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, "marks a turning point in our efforts to help states and societies manage the difficult transition from war to peace."

Swedish diplomat Jan Eliasson, president of the UN General Assembly, says: "When the cameras disappear, the attention also disappears. Five years later you pay an enormously heavy price ... this is what we are trying to repair when we fill this institutional gap."

Canada was one of the backers of the new commission, approved during a contentious UN summit last September. But there were fears that it would be delayed for months of bickering over its membership and chain of command.

However, in a rare show of unanimity, the powerful five permanent members of the Security Council, and the 191-country General Assembly endorsed three resolutions to kick-start the new commission as the new year began. Officially, the new body will have only an advisory and co-ordinating role, making use of the UN's worldwide resources to "propose integrated strategies for post-conflict recovery."

It would ensure that the billions of dollars pledged for helping war-torn countries are spent in more effective and timely ways, and provide early warning of danger signs in countries still at risk from deep-seated tensions.

"It will be a way of sharing information that is completely lacking at present," says Roland Paris, director of research at the Conference Board of Canada, and author of *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict*. "That alone could make it an effective body."

The birth of the new commission is also symbolic of a new recognition that peace is a struggle as intensive as any war. Treaties and peacekeeping troops are only the beginning of that battle, experts say, and they must be part of a broad strategy designed to make strife-torn countries both peaceful and liveable for their citizens, many of whom are deeply traumatized, impoverished, sick and homeless.

"The stakes could hardly be higher," says Gareth Evans, president of the International Crisis Group, and a former Australian foreign minister.

"Failure to consolidate peace can result not only in more death and misery for those immediately involved, but the kind of instability and chaos that breeds and supports terrorism; aids trafficking in drugs, arms and persons; and helps the spread of pandemic diseases," Evans says.

New commission recognizes that peace is a struggle as intensive as any war

To rebuild countries from the grassroots requires substantial funding — something historically easier to raise for wars than peacemaking activities. And, Evans points out, the UN made an "unhappy compromise" in allowing the activities of the commission to be paid for by a voluntary fund, rather than assessed contributions that would be mandatory.

"The risk is that a co-ordinating body without the resources to apply to influence actions on the ground may quickly become irrelevant," he says.

The new Peacebuilding Commission's administration will be set up from the UN budget, whose costs will be decided this spring. But its programs will be paid for by a trust fund, to which donors can give at their discretion.

Johanna Mendelson Forman, director of the peace, security and human rights program at the Washington-based UN Foundation, says that without adequate funding, the UN may have "created a body that doesn't have the capacity or staff to do its job. It can't carry out all the work it needs to do unless it has legs."

But, says Stewart Patrick, a fellow of the Center for Global Development in Washington, money alone cannot restore failed states without strong strategic planning.

Patrick, who helped to set up the U.S. State Department's Office of the Co-Ordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, says major funders of reconstruction try to get the job done quickly. But they are bound by legislative restrictions that favour their own companies, at the expense of local contractors.

"It ends up creating a parallel economy, so the indigenous public sector has no support." As a result, the local economy is neglected, and when the big international projects are finished, it is in tatters. That sparks a volatile combination of poverty and resentment which can reignite war.

Quick political fixes, such as "transferring the formal trappings of power" to a hastily installed post-conflict government also fail, says Patrick.

Author Paris adds, it's a mistake to attempt hasty solutions in war-ravaged counties by applying

Western ideals of democratic and economic reform.

UN observers conclude, whatever its shortcomings, the new Peacebuilding Commission is also a hopeful development in a long and chequered history of international conflict prevention.

"It will bring in the experience of countries that have been through conflict, along with the UN's top donors and troop contributors," says Paris. "That will mean more progress in peacebuilding, despite its failings. I think that leaves room for optimism."

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