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To Take Away the Occasion of War: Preventing Violent Conflict

An Emerging Mission

In a formal address in 1998, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan pushed the international community toward a new understanding of its role in managing global peace and security:

"For the United Nations, there is no higher goal, no deeper commitment and no greater ambition than preventing armed conflict. The prevention of conflict begins and ends with the protection of human life and the promotion of human development. Ensuring human security is, in the broadest sense, the United Nations' cardinal mission. Genuine and lasting prevention is the means to achieve that mission."

In May 2001, the Secretary-General is expected to release a new report dedicated to conflict prevention. Discussions among Member States and within the UN system as a whole during the months prior to its release will help shape its content, scope, reception, implementation, and follow-up. This opening for dialogue represents a critical moment in the international community's ongoing effort to develop more responsible and effective mechanisms for managing and preventing violent conflict.

"There is a time, when nations shall not learn war any more, but shall come to that which shall take away the occasion of wars."

--George Fox

The UN and Conflict Prevention

Since the publishing of *An Agenda for Peace* in 1992, conflict prevention has garnered increasing attention and controversy in the UN

community. On September 7, 2000, during the Millennium Assembly of the UN, the Security Council passed a resolution pledging "to enhance the effectiveness of the United Nations in addressing conflict at all stages

from prevention to settlement to post-conflict peacebuilding" (SC/RES/1318, 2000). The resolution followed a series of recent reports and initiatives (*see sidebar*).

All these initiatives are quite encouraging. For too long the UN has faced growing commitment to respond to international crises with diminishing resources and support. Struggling to maintain more than a dozen peacekeeping operations around the world, the UN is often called on long after a conflict has soured for peaceful resolution. A new focus on early warning for early action, long-term structural prevention, and cooperative problem-solving is a welcome vision for the new millennium.

Unfortunately, the active engagement of many UN agencies and Member States in developing conflict prevention initiatives has not yet translated into consensus or an operational plan of action for the international community. For the most part, Member States, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations alike remain focused on short-term responses to immediate emergencies. Faced with so much urgent suffering, the international community finds it difficult to locate the time, resources, and energy to think, plan, and operate 10 or 20 years ahead, as comprehensive conflict prevention would require. Moreover, it is much easier to go on avoiding the difficult issues related to sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, and new modes of cooperation that entangle the conflict prevention debate.

The Challenges Ahead

The UN is actively engaging in conflict prevention work. The first case of a preventive peace operation - the deployment of UNPREDEP in Macedonia in 1992 - has been hailed as a success in both halting the spread of violence and providing a less costly alternative to large-scale armed intervention. The UN's post-conflict peacebuilding work in places like El Salvador, Mozambique, and Cambodia has also demonstrated the

preventive nature of much of the Organization's post-settlement work. However considerable challenges persist.

International and Regional Prevention Initiatives

Publication of the Secretary-General's 1999 Annual Report on the Work of the Organization focused specifically on "Preventing War and Disaster";

A New Conflict Perspective

The progression of conflict can be understood as a continuum of unraveling stages, from stable cooperation and discussion, to

miscommunication, division, threats, and finally destruction and armed aggression. Once an agreement has been reached, parties to a conflict then must work their way back toward peaceful cooperation and reconciliation. Although complex international and intrastate conflicts do not always follow such a simple progression, de-escalation often involves moving the parties step-by-step back down the stages. During different phases of a conflict, the relationships, perceptions, issues, and interactions between parties vary, and different methods for positive outside intervention are needed.

The most difficult time to intervene effectively in conflicts is undoubtedly after they have reached the stages of violence and armed aggression or are in the early process of implementing a negotiated agreement. Yet, these stages of greatest tension and least opportunity are often the very moments UN peacekeeping operations enter a conflict. At this point, the best UN peacekeepers can do is create a safe space for other international, regional, and local actors to begin reweaving the fabric of a stable society.

A long-term perspective and deepened understanding of the structural roots and unraveling processes of violent conflict are needed if the UN hopes to succeed in its preeminent purpose: "To maintain international peace and security, and to that end to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace..." (UN Charter, Article 1, Paragraph 1).

Particularly in the face of rising intrastate conflict (in Indonesia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo), the persistence of intractable wars (Angola, Colombia), and the growing interconnectedness brought on by globalization, the UN is challenged to reexamine its current ways of working and consider new possibilities

for early, effective, and less costly methods of conflict prevention.

As the authors of the recent book *Breaking Cycles of Violence: Conflict Prevention in Intrastate Crises* point out, conflict prevention is envisioned as a non-intrusive, collaborative process: "The objective is to gain time and enhance the possibilities to employ a low-profile, 'early' preventive diplomacy, and other non-coercive and non-military preventive measures. The resort to more visible and coercive forms of 'late' preventive action means the 'early' prevention has failed." Through this model, a broad array of roles for different national, regional, and international actors could be developed.

The Swedish Government has already developed its own national plan of action for "Preventing Violent Conflict," which describes a "ladder of prevention" and includes five major goals with specific planned policies and programs for each:

1. To promote a culture of prevention;
2. To identify structural risk factors;
3. To develop the international system of norms and strengthen its implementation;
4. To strengthen the international institutional framework and its preventive instruments;
5. To strengthen Sweden's capacity for international conflict prevention activities in various policy arenas (foreign policy and security, trade, migration, and development assistance).

In addition, this year in its capacity as EU President, Sweden will also be working with its European partners to promote a conflict prevention agenda on the regional level.

Ultimately, the best approach to preventing violent conflict may be multilateral cooperation to encourage good governance, human rights, just economic structures and sustainable development, environmental security, respectful ethnic, racial, and religious relations, the increased use of good offices and preventive diplomacy, and national and regional conflict management capacity-building. As UNDP points out in a recent paper titled "Development, Peace, and Security" (1999),

"A comprehensive preventive strategy must first focus on the underlying political, social, economic, and environmental causes of conflict. Over the long run, easing these is the most effective way to prevent conflict. Such a basic approach is also likely to cost less than action taken after conflicts have erupted."

From this perspective, conflict prevention becomes the responsibility of all parties, at all stages of conflict. [Table 1 \(pp.6-7\)](#) lists some of the preventive options for different sectors at various stages of a conflict. Viewed as a horizontal image, the available options decrease as the conflict heightens toward war and then increase again in the aftermath of a settlement. This horizontal "*hourglass effect*" illustrates the value of international preventive action prior to the escalation of a conflict and its connection with post-conflict peacebuilding.

Indeed, conflict analysis experts have now divided the concept of violence prevention into various phases, from

(a) preventing violent disputes from arising, known as **conflict prevention**, to

(b) preventing both the vertical (to more destructive levels of violence) and horizontal (to involve additional actors) escalation of hostilities, known as **escalation prevention**, to

(c) preventing the re-emergence of disputes, called **post-conflict prevention**.

Educating governments, the UN's own personnel, and civil society on the potential of preventive activity is an important first step in moving the conflict prevention agenda forward.

Issues Below the Surface

Listening to the speeches and presentations of Member States on the issue of conflict prevention, one is struck by the resurfacing of a number of phrases: national sovereignty; humanitarian intervention; territorial integrity; comprehensive peace operations; robust action. Many of these words are the mere tips of icebergs - glimpses of critical obstacles facing the UN and its role in global peace and security today.

The debate around conflict prevention is tied up with the UN's ongoing struggle to adapt to the changing nature of conflict and the growing demands upon the world organization. The UN currently maintains 15 peacekeeping operations and 14 political/peace-building missions around the world, centered mostly in Africa, the

Middle East and eastern Europe, and parts of Asia. Resources are stretched well beyond capacity, and the demand for international action in areas of crisis continues to rise. At the same time, emphasis on holistic human security, coupled with the success of post-conflict peacebuilding missions in places like East Timor, Mozambique, and El Salvador, have led to more integrated peacekeeping operations that include attention to human rights, justice systems, and social development.

Unfortunately, the UN's role as an intervening agent in conflict has also been tarnished over the past decade. Experiences in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and Sierra Leone have undermined the UN's legitimacy, raised serious questions about the operation and mandate of UN peacekeeping, and challenged the international community to rethink the "dilemma of intervention."

The upcoming report on conflict prevention, due in May 2001, will follow on the heels of unprecedented criticism of UN peace operations. Reports on UN peacekeeping missions in Srebrenica, Rwanda, and most recently the Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations (known as the Brahimi Report) have all been openly critical of the UN and point to a desire for a major overhaul in the system to address critical weaknesses.

Since U.S./NATO military action against Serbia in 1999, the debate on "humanitarian intervention" has also been linked to any discussion of conflict prevention. Although the term humanitarian intervention has historically implied

non-military efforts to address a human rights, refugee or other crisis, since Kosovo it has become nearly synonymous with military intervention against a human rights abuser or oppressive regime. Discussions of conflict prevention inevitably touch on questions of when, why, and how the UN, regional organizations or other international actors are empowered to intervene in intrastate crises. Currently, no such guidelines exist, although some Member States have called for their creation.

Moreover, agreement has not been reached on how the UN should improve its peace operations. The Brahimi Report included sweeping structural, operational, and mandate changes, many of which were met with criticism and outspoken opposition. Some Member States are skeptical of calls for more "comprehensive" and "integrated" peace operations, fearing that expanded mandates would lead to an increased role for the Security Council in social and political affairs. Questions also

remain regarding how "robust" to make peacekeeping mandates and how to ensure that missions are not deployed to situations in which there is no peace to keep.

Finally, although the international community is in agreement that prevention is less costly and more desirable than responding at the eleventh hour, deliberations continue among Member States over thorny issues of sovereignty, Security Council reform, and a general lack of political will, and human and financial resources. Some Member States, particularly those from the North who would likely be the interveners in crisis, call for "more robust" action, suggesting increased armed intervention and "peace enforcement." Others, including many developing countries that might be more likely to be intervened upon, translate the concept of "enhanced conflict prevention" as "increased international interference."

In the end, both sides remain resistant to considering the possibilities for non-threatening, peaceful interventions in conflicts before they reach crisis levels.

The Path Ahead

On July 20, 2000, during its second open debate on conflict prevention, Secretary-General Kofi Annan challenged the Security Council to "make conflict prevention the cornerstone of collective security in the twenty-first century." Indeed the very viability of the UN as an international organ for peace and security may depend on its ability over the coming years to transform the current reliance on eleventh hour armed force into a global political, economic and social culture of mainstream, ongoing peacemaking and peacebuilding.

The Secretary-General's Report on Conflict Prevention will send an important signal to Member States, UN agencies, and civil society groups about the path ahead for conflict prevention. It is not yet clear whether the report will take a bold stand in pushing the international community toward implementing a truly preventive agenda, or opt for a go-slow approach in the hopes of garnering greater consensus and support first. However, to maintain momentum on the issue and generate significant progress toward developing a global conflict prevention capacity, Member States and their UN partners will need to address a number of issues:

- What should the role of the Security Council, the General Assembly, regional organizations, national governments, and civil society be in conflict prevention? How should these roles be coordinated?

- Under what circumstances does the international community have the responsibility to intervene in crisis situations?, or, as one diplomat put it "When does "suffering trump sovereignty?"
- From where will the necessary resources for implementing effective preventive action come?
- How will preventive efforts be coordinated with and enhanced by peacekeeping and post-conflict peace operations?
- How can the political will to act be generated before violence erupts?
- What fault lines threaten to divide the developing and developed world on this issue?
- How can conflict prevention become a truly collaborative effort between North and South?

Addressing these questions and the problems underlying them will require the collaboration and imagination of all Member States, UN bodies, and civil society. The fruits of that labor, however, could be a new era of cooperative global security - one based on the peaceful prevention of violent disputes.

This briefing paper was prepared by Bridget Moix

Endnotes

- i. The Address of the Secretary-General upon the presentation of the Final Report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, New York, Feb. 5, 1998.*
- ii. Leatherman, Janie; DeMars, William; Gaffney, Patrick; Vayrynen, Raimo. Breaking Cycles of Violence: Conflict Prevention in Intrastate Crises. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1999, p. 42 and 99.*
- iii. "Development, Peace, and Security," UNDP Paper, 1999.*
- iv. Leatherman, Janie; DeMars, William; Gaffney, Patrick; Vayrynen, Raimo. Breaking Cycles of Violence: Conflict Prevention in Intrastate Crises. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1999 p. 99.*

For Further Reading

Cases and Strategies for Preventive Action. Ed. Barnett Rubin. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1998.

The Costs of Conflict: Prevention and Cure in the Global Arena Ed. Michael Brown and Richard Rosencrance. Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999.

Leatherman, Janie; DeMars, William; Gaffney, Patrick; Vayrynen, Raimo. *Breaking Cycles of Violence: Conflict Prevention in Intrastate Crises*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1999.

Lund, Michael. *Preventing Violent Conflicts*. Washington, DC: USIP Press, 1996

"Preventing Violent Conflict: A Swedish Action Plan," available through the *QUNO*, NY office.

"Preventing War and Disaster," The Secretary General's Annual Report on the Work of the Organization, 1999.

"The Question of Intervention," Statement by the Secretary-General, 1999.

The Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations, A/55/305

http://www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations/

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Table 1:

Preventive Options

Stages of Conflict

Types of Tools	PRE-WAR		*WAR*	POST-WAR	
	Stable Peace ~ Low Tension	High Tension ~ Crisis		Ceasefire ~ De-escalation	Reconciliation/ Reconstruction
Economic/ Development	<p>Strengthening the macro-economic environment</p> <p>Promoting participatory development and public/private sector cooperation</p> <p>Encouraging equitable income distribution and fair trade principles</p> <p>International development aid to promote growth that benefits all</p>	<p>Conflict-sensitive development and economic relief efforts.</p> <p>Economic incentives from international community to reduce tension and seek settlement.</p>	<p>Economic sanctions and asset-freezing</p> <p>Humanitarian aid</p>	<p>Supporting job creation demobilization/reintegration programs.</p> <p>International financial support for implementing peace agreements</p> <p>Assistance in undoing war economy and creating peace-based economic environment/institutions</p>	<p>Promoting intergroup economic activity and joint ventures</p> <p>Financial assistance for community development projects and related enterprises</p> <p>Reintegrating into global economy with an eye to equitable distribution of income/capital and fair trade.</p> <p>Private sector investment in reconciliation/reconstruction efforts.</p>
Governance/ Political Systems	<p>Conflict-management capacity initiatives with various levels of government</p> <p>Supporting democratic institution-building</p> <p>Strengthening international diplomatic relations and fora</p> <p>Promoting good governance values and institutional development</p>	<p>Providing good offices and preventive diplomacy exchanges</p> <p>Promoting democratic transitions of power (election-monitoring and assistance)</p>	<p>Diplomatic isolation</p> <p>Political "sticks" and "carrots"</p>	<p>Regional and international assistance in implementing political reform or power transitions</p> <p>Election-monitoring and democratic institution-building</p> <p>Reintegrating elected government into diplomatic community</p>	<p>Institutionalizing regional and international diplomacy mechanisms</p> <p>Democracy-building assistance and investment</p> <p>Strengthening participatory political mechanisms at the grassroots level</p> <p>Mainstreaming conflict management training for government officials</p>
Social/ Educational	<p>Supporting the education and empowerment of women</p> <p>Promoting broad education and literacy</p> <p>Encouraging intergroup (ethnic, religious, racial) cooperation and collaboration</p>	<p>Helping maintain lines of communication and interaction between conflict groups</p> <p>Encouraging tolerance-based education</p>	<p>"Standing between" conflict groups to reduce violence</p>	<p>Assistance with reintegration of conflict groups and reconciliation efforts at the community level</p> <p>Promoting peace education in schools and with adults</p> <p>Assisting with reconstruction</p>	<p>Mainstreaming peace education and women's empowerment</p> <p>Strengthening social fora for interaction and communication among groups</p> <p>Promoting a "culture of prevention"</p>

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Table 1 (contd.)

Stages of Conflict

<i>Types of Tools</i>	PRE-WAR		*WAR*	POST-WAR	
	Stable Peace ~ Low Tension	High Tension ~ Crisis		Ceasefire ~ De-escalation	Reconciliation/ Reconstruction
Rule of Law and Justice	Offering bilateral and multilateral police and legal training Human rights advocacy and education Justice system institutional development Development of the ICC	Human rights monitors Use of international legal action against human rights abusers	International denouncement of human rights abusers	Post-conflict development of judicial systems and legal training Human rights observers Truth and Justice Commissions and/or Tribunals	ICC, regional, and national judicial capacity-building Promoting the development of strong human rights law Encouraging international cooperation on refugee, migration laws Supporting restorative justice and alternative dispute resolution
Disarmament/ Local Security	Developing stricture controls and compliance with international standards for conventional weapons, small arms, and landmines Encouraging greater arms trade transparency and monitoring Promoting gun control and community safety programs Compliance with the CTBT and Nonproliferation Treaty	Arms embargoes and economic incentives for reducing military build-up Nonviolent rapid reaction forces International accompaniment	Preventive peacekeeping deployment	Supporting reintegration and demobilization programs for former combatants, particularly child soldiers Assistance with weapons collections and military build-down Promoting local interpretation and understanding of peace agreement	Global reductions in military spending International adoption of a Code of Conduct on Arms Transfers Encouraging gun-free zones and community disarmament programs Promoting global nuclear disarmament
Environmental/ Natural Resources	Regional monitoring, education, and collaboration on environmental threats International attention to the potential for water and other resource-based conflicts Naming and blaming of blood diamond and other industries fueling conflict	Boycott or embargoes on products reaped from violent conflict International assistance with monitoring and responding to environmental security threats	Tightened sanctions and humanitarian aid	International environmental relief efforts Assistance with developing sustainable environmental policies on a national and regional basis	Adoption of international treaties / standards for environmental security and sustainable earth policies Promoting fair sharing of natural resources and environmental costs Mainstreaming environmental/earth education and training in schools and governments
Third-Party Mediation/ Peacemaking	Conflict management, mediation, and peacemaking training and exchanges Promoting the development of community, school, and legal mediation initiatives Encouraging intergroup dialogue and discussion on potential issues of conflict	Offering good offices and third-party mediation Assistance in conflict resolution initiatives with high, mid, and grassroots level groups	Providing resources and political support for a negotiated settlement	Assistance with treaty obligation monitoring and negotiation follow-up Maintaining an on-call international mediation presence	Developing an international entourage of conflict resolution/mediation experts and practitioners Mainstreaming peacemaking in education and government Strengthening cross-cultural exchange and education in peacemaking methods

Preventive Options