

## **Conflict or Co-existence?**

**by Gareth Evans**

[Back to Previous Page](#)

The world as we see it around us doesn't immediately suggest that we have learned much about peaceful coexistence. Whether it's Iraq or Israel-Palestine, Sri Lanka or Nepal, Darfur or the Eastern Congo, the Korean Peninsula or the Taiwan Strait, Colombia or the Caucasus, London or Bali, or wherever else in the world each day the golden media rule applies - "if it bleeds, it leads" - we are assailed with a constant flow of news about war, potential war or violent extremism which seems depressingly endless.

But what I want to suggest is that, for all that has gone wrong and continues to go wrong when it comes to war, civil war, mass violence and terrorism, conflict is not inevitable. We have learned a great deal about how to prevent and resolve it, particularly over the last decade; the record is rather better than it seems (at least in relation to war and civil war, if not terrorism) and we can do better still if governments and intergovernmental organizations apply the right kinds of policies and give the right kind of leadership.

The basic point about conflict and extremist violence is that it is always context specific.

Big overarching theories about conflict - 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 certainly good for 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:

- 1) For every case of religious or ethnic or linguistic difference erupting in communal violence, there are innumerable more cases around the world of people and groups of different cultures and backgrounds living harmoniously side by side;
- 2) For every group economic grievance that erupts in catastrophic violence there are innumerable more that don't;
- 3) For every instance of economic greed - for control of resources or the levers of government - generating or fuelling outright conflict, there are innumerable more that don't;
- 4) For every assertion of power or hegemony - internal, regional or global - that results in outright military aggression there are many more that don't;
- 5) For every Muslim in the Arab-Islamic world whose feeling of grievance or humiliation against the US or the West takes a violent form, there are many millions more for whom it doesn't; and
- 6) For every alienated second-generation immigrant, not succeeding in the new world but feeling adrift from the cultural moorings of his old, who translates that rage or despair into indiscriminate terrorist violence, there are innumerable more for whom that is inconceivable.

All this simply means that there are no single causal explanations, and no accompanying single big fixes, for any of the various continuing problems of conflict and violence that beset us. The problems are complex and multi-dimensional, and so too are the solutions.

### **There are solutions**

But there are solutions, and they do work. We are getting better all the time at identifying and applying them: those of us who spend our time in the conflict prevention and resolution business are not wasting our time. Let me give you right at the outset just a few figures to make the point. They mostly come from the long awaited

Human Security Report - a project supported by five major governments (Canada, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK), edited by Andrew Mack of the University of British Columbia, and to be published next month by Oxford University Press, which has tried to bring together for the first time in a really comprehensive way data about wars, terrorist acts and atrocity crimes that is presently not collected by any international agency.

1) There has been a dramatic decline in the number of armed conflicts since the early 90s - by 80% in the case of conflicts with 1000 or more battle deaths in a year. Although some 60 violent conflicts are still being waged around the world, war between states has almost completely disappeared - now less than 5% of all conflicts - and the overall environment is one of really major reduction.

2) Paralleling the number of conflicts, the number of battle deaths is also dramatically down, both in absolute numbers, and in terms of the deadliness of each individual conflict. Whereas back in the 1950s and for years thereafter the average number of deaths per conflict per year were 30,000-40,000, by the early 2000s this number was down to around 600 - reflecting the shift from high to low intensity conflicts, and geographically from Asia to Africa. Of course violent battle deaths are only a small part of the whole story of the misery of war: as many as 90% of war-related deaths are due to disease and malnutrition rather than direct violence. But the trend decline in battle deaths is a significant and highly encouraging story.

3) There has been a dramatic increase in the number of conflicts resolved by active peacemaking, involving diplomatic negotiations, international mediation and the like: the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change which reported to the Secretary-General in the lead-up to this year's UN Summit, came up with the startling but well-researched statement that more civil wars have been ended by negotiation in the last 15 years than in the previous two centuries.

There are a number of reasons contributing to these turnarounds - including the end of the era of colonialism, which generated two-thirds or more of all wars from the 1950s to the 1980s; the end of the Cold War, which meant no more proxy wars fuelled by Washington or Moscow and also the demise of a number of authoritarian governments, generating internal resentment and resistance, that each side had been propping up.

But the best explanation is the one that stares us in the face, although many don't want to acknowledge it. This is the huge increase (from four to ten times or more, on the Human Security Report's calculations) in the level of international preventive diplomacy, diplomatic peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations, for the most part authorized by and mounted by the United Nations, that has occurred since the end of the Cold War.

And this has been reinforced in turn by the huge increase in the activity of other players, not least NGOs and other civil society actors, working alongside the UN system and governments, needling them into action, acting as partners in delivery, or playing critical support roles in institutional capacity building, community dialogue and confidence building and actual peacemaking through mediation and conciliation.

My own International Crisis Group, for example, which didn't exist ten years ago, is an organization devoted to the prevention and resolution of deadly conflict, which now has an annual budget of around \$12 million, and a full-time analysis and advocacy staff of 110 people of over 40 nationalities working in some 50 conflict or potential conflict areas across four continents, with advocacy offices in New York, Washington, Brussels and London - all of us spending our time, with a reasonable degree of success, telling governments what they don't want to hear and persuading them to do what they don't want to do.

What is it that we have learned about what works and what doesn't when it comes to war and civil war? What are the things that governments and intergovernmental organizations have been doing right up to a point, but need to do a lot more of, and a lot more consistently? Let me give you a quick checklist, from my own experience, of the major lessons we have learned - or should have learned - for each main stage of the conflict cycle, starting with conflict prevention.

### **Conflict prevention**

The first rule of preventing deadly conflict is not to start it, a message the US is certainly now pondering after its rush to war in Iraq. There are circumstances in which there will simply be no alternative to taking military action, to respond to real and immediate cross-border threats, and - in the case of man-made internal crises of the kind we confronted in the Balkans and Rwanda and elsewhere so often in the last decade - in the context of the principle of the "responsibility to protect" now endorsed by last month's UN Summit (one of its very few positive achievements). But military action should only ever be undertaken in the most serious cases, as a last resort, and in circumstances where it will do more good than harm.

The second rule of conflict prevention is to understand the causes: the factors at work - political, economic, cultural, personal - in each particular risk situation. Don't be quick to apply grand theories, or make assumptions on the basis of experience elsewhere: look at what is under your nose.

The third rule is to fully understand, and be prepared to apply flexibly as circumstances change, what's in the conflict prevention toolbox - the range of possible measures, both long-term structural and short-term operational, that can be deployed to deal with high-risk situations. Broadly speaking, there are political and diplomatic tools (e.g., negotiation of new power or resource-sharing arrangements), legal and constitutional tools (e.g., human rights protections for individuals or groups - of the kind often negotiated by the OSCE's High Commissioner for National Minorities), economic tools (e.g., development measures to redress inequities, or targeted sanctions) and military tools (including security sector reform, preventive deployments and, in extreme cases, the threat of military force) - and we know a lot more about how to use them now than we did even just a decade ago.

The fourth rule is to be prepared to put in the necessary government and intergovernmental resources, 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.

The fifth rule is for governments to leverage those resources by using all the extraordinary capability that is now available from non-governmental organizations and civil society generally in the ways I have already mentioned.

### **Conflict resolution**

When prevention fails, and the task becomes that of conflict resolution, again there are a number of lessons we have painfully learned about what makes a successful peace accord:

First, it 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. We need to constantly remember the awful examples of the 1994 Rwanda genocide, taking 800,000 lives, which followed the Arusha peace deal just a year before, and the 1991 Bicesse Agreement to end the war in Angola, which was followed by a relapse into bloody conflict for another decade with another million or more lives lost.

Second, 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: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the Caucasus might be such an example. But the failed Oslo process for Israel-Palestine shows how risky that approach can be.

Third, any successful peace accord must get the balance right between peace and justice. The South African truth and reconciliation commission model, with its amnesties for the perpetrators of even serious crimes, is widely admired, but in other cases sustainable peace will not be possible without significant retributive justice: visible trial and punishment. 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.

Fourth, the terms of any accord, and the method of its enforcement and implementation, must be sufficiently resilient to deal with spoilers - those who would seek to undermine or overturn it.

Fifth - 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.

#### Post-conflict peacebuilding

The biggest lessons of all about the handling of conflict that we have learned in recent years - not least from Rwanda and Angola as already mentioned, and from Haiti and Afghanistan and now Iraq, is the critical necessity of effective post-conflict peacebuilding, to ensure that the whole weary conflict cycle does not begin again. We know all too well that the best single indicator of future conflict is past conflict - reflecting the reality that over and over again the critical underlying conflict-causing factors have simply not been properly addressed.

My quick checklist here of what we have learned about what is necessary to make international peacebuilding missions successful:

- 1) 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. High-level coordination is one of the critical roles envisaged for the new Peacebuilding Commission, approved at the UN Summit - if its detailed operating arrangements can now be agreed.
- 2) Commit the necessary resources, and sustain that commitment for as long as it takes: this again is envisaged as a critical role for the Peacebuilding Commission, given the long and lamentable history of ad hoc donors' conferences, and rapidly waning attention, and generosity, once the immediate crisis is over.
- 3) Understand the local political dynamics - and the limits of what outsiders can do. Iraq is an unhappy example of how much can go wrong when that understanding is lacking.
- 4) Recognize 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.
- 5) 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