

Conflict prevention and conflict resolution: limits of multilateralism

by
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Throughout the 1990s both practitioners and scholars have paid extensive attention to conflict prevention. Preventive actions are designed to resolve, manage, or contain disputes before they become violent. Conflict management, in turn, means the limitation, mitigation and containment of conflict. The notion of conflict prevention includes numerous activities such as conflict avoidance and conflict resolution, with techniques such as mediation, peace-keeping, peacemaking, confidence-building measures, and track-two diplomacy.

The concept of conflict prevention rests today on an impressive body of literature. Also, the United Nations, regional organizations, State entities and non-governmental organizations have engaged in recent years in systematic “lessons learned” and “best practices” exercises with regard to failed missions or missed opportunities. Furthermore, numerous high profile and well financed research projects and blue ribbon reports have come up with policy recommendations that are directly feeding into the highest level of decision-making at the UN and other organizations.¹

But despite all these developments, conflict prevention remains an enigma. Conflicts continue to emerge and many of them turn violent. In the 1990s decade alone, approximately 5.5 million peo-

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ple were killed in almost 100 armed conflicts. These deadly conflicts have led to widespread devastation and regional instabilities, as well as large numbers of refugees. The international community remains unable to prevent the outbreak of war and the scope of action of many organizations is confined to limiting the negative effects of violence.

The main source of frustration for the international community is its inability to credibly and accurately predict and rapidly respond to conflicts that threaten to turn violent. This is due both to the complex dynamics of internal, ethnic and communal conflicts and to the reluctance of many States to take steps that involve risks and costs. Nevertheless, the increasing presence of international organizations and State and non-State entities in conflict-prone areas raises the hope that a multilateralization of conflict prevention could reduce the number of missed opportunities in the future.

This paper explores the extent to which the international and regional organizations, States and non-State entities are prepared and able to engage in a coordinated system of multilateral preventive diplomacy. For this purpose, it will first take stock of past and current efforts to enhance conflict prevention. In the second part, it will examine opportunities and pitfalls for the UN, regional organizations and international contact groups. Finally, the paper will explore the tricky balancing act of NGOs and international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross to preserve their impartiality in the course of collective efforts to curb or avert violence and deadly conflicts.

Taking stock of past and current conflict prevention activities

International prevention of internal conflicts has been advocated since the end of the Cold War. In the light of several conflict management tasks successfully accomplished by the UN in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Namibia, Nicaragua, El Salvador), the UN Secretary-General's *Agenda for Peace* of 1992 devoted an entire chapter

¹ See, e.g., *Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report, with Executive Summary*, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, New York, December 1997.

to conflict prevention. One of the novelties of his report was the creation of a conceptual link between various stages of conflict escalation and those policy actions that could remedy them. These include conflict prevention, dispute escalation prevention and the limitation of the spread of violence if it occurs. The last segment of these policy responses also opened the door to conflict management, an approach that established the conceptual ground for direct outside involvement to check escalating violence by using peaceful or even coercive means, if necessary.

The sobering experiences of the United Nations and the world at large in Somalia, Rwanda and Yugoslavia gave rise from the mid-1990s onward to the realization that there exists a clear need to reassess the role of the UN and other international entities in conflict prevention and conflict management. This realization was based on the recognition that conflict prevention needs a thorough understanding of conflicts and their relationship to failed States and State formation, and an institutional framework that can implement policy responses in a rapid and coherent manner.

The academic community and independent expert commissions consequently launched important research projects and policy recommendations in the latter 1990s on causalities of internal conflicts and the viability and utility of preventive diplomacy.² A series of studies specifically addressed the UN, its reform and its ability to respond to conflict and complex emergencies.³ Finally, the publication in late 1999 of

² Michael Brown (ed.), *The International Dimension of Internal Conflict*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1997; Ted Robert Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts*, United States Institute for Peace Press, Washington, DC, 1993; Stephen Van Evera, "Hypotheses on nationalism and war", in Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Politics*, Harper Collins, New York, 1996, pp. 5-39. *Final Report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly*

Conflict, *op. cit.* (note 1), Chapter 5: The responsibility of States, leaders, and civil society.

³ The main studies are: *Our Global Neighbourhood*, Commission on Global Governance, 1995; Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers, *A World in Need of Leadership: Tomorrow's United Nations*, 1996; *Words to Deeds: Strengthening the UN's Enforcement Capabilities*, International Task Force on the Enforcement of UN Security Council Resolutions, 1997.

reports on the UN missions in Srebrenica and Rwanda have provided a thorough account of lessons learned from failed opportunities of the UN to prevent the escalation of deadly violence to all-out genocide.⁴

It would go beyond the scope of this paper to summarize the findings of the various studies. But it is important to highlight a few points that are relevant for conflict prevention efforts.

1. There are no simple explanations for causes of conflict and the way they fuel an escalation of violence. To understand the dynamics of internal conflicts a multitude of specific indicators need to be taken into account, such as poverty and high population growth, resource scarcity, discrimination and disempowerment of minorities and other groups in society, military threats and sources of insecurity. A certain mix of these variables can, but must not necessarily, lead to societal stress, violence and war.

2. It is important to distinguish between structural underlying causes of conflict and the proximate causes that trigger conflict escalation. This is the reason why conflict prevention today should differentiate between structural and short-term prevention. The structural causes primarily include factors related to State weakness, poverty, political injustice and economic deprivation. Thus, structural prevention should have a strong economic, human needs and governance bias, and should comprise development aid, local capacity-building, and assistance in election and human rights monitoring.

3. The proximate causes of conflict often result from deliberate decisions by determined leaders or political demagogues to make violent responses to contentious issues. "Bad leadership" can exploit insecurity, the vulnerability of certain groups and socio-economic cleavages to the extent that violence becomes a means to strengthen the hold of demagogues on power. Stephen Stedman argues that "the humanitarian tragedies of today were caused mainly by leaders who were interested in neither reaching non-violent resolutions to conflicts

⁴ Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 53/35: The fall of Srebrenica, General Assembly Doc. A/54/549, 15 November 1999. Report of the

independent inquiry into the actions of the United Nations during the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda, United Nations, 15 December 1999.

nor making concessions".⁵ In contrast to the structural causes, the understanding of proximate causes or events that trigger violence is not yet at an advanced stage and requires more study.⁶

4. There is no consensus on the utility of early warning in conflict prevention. Some analysts argue today that failed opportunities for conflict prevention have occurred not because of insufficient time to respond, but because of a lack of political will to react to the warning. The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict made one of the first efforts to link early warning with receptivity of warning and early response. But, as the 1999 Rwanda Report pointed out, early warning makes sense only if the warning signals are correctly analysed and transferred to the relevant decision-making authority. In this context, the capacity to gather and analyse information for the UN has fallen prey to "downsizing efforts". In 1992, the UN did away with the Office for Research and Collection of Information (OCRI) and transferred some of its functions to the Department of Political Affairs and, as a consequence, the 1995 Report of the Commission on Global Governance proposed that the UN develop a new system to collect information on trends and situations that may lead to violent conflict or humanitarian tragedies.⁷

5. The question as to the use of force is essential for assuring effective conflict prevention or the successful implementation of peace settlements. Given the notoriety of bad leaders and deliberate hindrance of conflict prevention and conflict termination, the international community is faced with the critical question whether coercive measures should constitute an integral part of conflict prevention. Examples such as Somalia have, however, painfully shown that the threat of outside intervention by force is no panacea for communal violence and the escalation of conflict.

6. Finally, the fact that the overwhelming majority of conflicts are internal struggles has an important impact on how the

⁵ Stephen Stedman, "Alchemy for a new world order overselling preventive diplomacy", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, May 1995, p. 18.

Millennium, Conference Report, International Peace Academy, New York, April 2000, p. 2.

⁷ *Our Global Neighbourhood*, *op. cit.* (note 3).

⁶ *From Reaction to Prevention: Opportunities for the UN System in the New*

international community can address such conflicts. Intra-State conflicts do require methods of early warning and prevention different from those for traditional inter-State confrontations.⁸ Issues such as sovereignty, local rivalries and bad neighbourhoods can make the use of preventive diplomacy towards States prone to civil war very difficult.

It is clear from the above points that conflict prevention today can only be carried out successfully in a multilateral setting with a multidisciplinary approach.

Towards multilateralization of conflict prevention?

The spread and global importance of internal conflicts in the 1990s, together with the increasing diversity of players in international affairs, has led to a certain multilateralization of conflict prevention efforts. This multilateralization presupposes that international and regional organizations, States and non-State entities would combine their efforts to fight the spread of deadly conflicts, in other words that all parties involved should accept a policy scheme that subscribes to a common vision on conflict resolution. But the diversity of mission mandates, the respective organizational turf, the bureaucratic red tape, national interests and conflicting views on conflict prevention and humanitarian actions set limits to effective multilateral action.

Among the various players, the United Nations remains the only institution with global legitimacy for conflict prevention. Yet regional organizations have been gaining importance in security cooperation over the last few years. While this type of cooperation is invaluable, the division of labour between the UN and regional organizations has run into trouble. For example, with regard to the NATO military intervention in Kosovo, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan warned that “conflict prevention, peace-keeping and peacemaking must not become an area of competition between the United Nations and regional organizations”.⁹

NGOs and humanitarian organizations play an integral and increasingly important role in conflict prevention, owing to their

⁸ Janie Leatherman, William DeMars et al., *Breaking Cycles of Violence*, Kumerian Press, West Hartford, 1999, p. 3.

⁹ Kofi Annan, *Annual Report of the Secretary-General*, 1999 (para. 69).

knowledge of and involvement in potential conflict areas. There is, however, an uneasy relationship between humanitarian organizations and other parties engaged in conflict prevention and peace implementation. In the final analysis, States remain the most important players in today's international system, and if their national interests are at stake, they may tend to short-cut international organizations in favour of international contact groups or unilateral action. The following section will briefly examine each of these entities and their ability and willingness to engage in multilateral preventive action.

The United Nations

Chapter VI of the UN Charter calls on those involved in a dispute to try to settle it peacefully, using a wide variety of diplomatic instruments. Article 99 of the Charter empowers the Secretary-General to bring to the attention of the Security Council "any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security".

But the efficiency of these instruments is limited by the reluctance of the UN member States and particularly by the permanent members of the Security Council to confer more power upon the Secretary-General and his organization. The proposals for a UN Rapid Reaction Force, an important element for conflict prevention, has been thwarted for many years, even though eminent policy-makers and experts, such as Brian Urquhart, have called for it.¹⁰

The defining question with regard to these forces, and to conflict prevention in general, is to what extent the United Nations can use its organization effectively for early warning and succeed in gaining sufficient commitments from member States for robust peace operations to be staged. Recent lessons learned from the developments in Rwanda and Srebrenica provide a very valuable insight into how the UN's approach to unfolding conflicts and deadly violence can be improved. Key issues concern the use of force, command and control, and the training and equipment of UN peace forces. The essential ques-

¹⁰ *Op. cit.* (note 3).

tion remains the manner in which troop-contributing States are linked to the peace operation and how the Security Council is involved.

Both in Rwanda and in Bosnia, the UN failed to prevent genocide from taking place. In each case there was plenty of warning of the forthcoming mass killings, but the UN mishandled both of them. Two reports examining these cases were finally published in late 1999. Given the involvement of Kofi Annan as rapporteur of the Srebrenica mass killings and as one of the key persons to take partial blame at the UN for the handling of the unfortunate mission during the Rwanda genocide, these reports assume a high profile and could have a big impact on future policy-making in conflict prevention and conflict management.

In the case of Rwanda, the inadequate resources and the major countries' absence of political will were the underlying causes of failure. The report sums up that the UN presence in Rwanda was "not planned, dimensioned, deployed or instructed in a way which provided for a proactive and assertive role in dealing with a peace process in serious trouble".¹¹ The mission lacked well-trained troops, functioning matériel and military capacity. The dearth of strong political commitments was made worse by the unilateral withdrawal of the national contingents during crucial moments of the unfolding crisis. In the case of Srebrenica, with the lack of commitments by outside powers to an effective resolution of the war in Bosnia, "a consensus absent in the Council, lacking a strategy, and burdened by an unclear mandate, UNPROFOR was forced to chart its own course".¹²

There was early warning of the coming massacres: the Special UN Representative in Rwanda reported that one group was in clear violation of the peace agreement by stockpiling ammunition, distributing weapons and reinforcing positions in Kigali. Also, the now infamous cable by Force Commander General Dallaire refers unequivocally and urgently to information about planning and practical preparations for mass killings. The problem with early warning was twofold: first, the information was not processed correctly at the UN, owing to

¹¹ Rwanda Report, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 21.

¹² Srebrenica Report, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 17

sloppiness and wrong lines of communication at its New York headquarters, and second, the “lack of capacity for intelligence analysis” contributed to an erroneous interpretation by the UN of the Arusha peace process and the intentions of the parties thereto. The lack of in-depth analysis of the political situation on the ground in Rwanda was clearly evidenced by the oversight of an alarming report by the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights that — just two weeks before the UNAMIR mission was launched — pointed to the deteriorating human rights situation and explicitly referred to the dangers of genocide.¹³

Another lesson learned in conflict prevention is that the peace implementers should be able to continually adjust mission mandates, rules of engagement, troop strength and military capacities of peace missions to changing realities on the ground. The Rwanda mandate changed in nature from Chapter VI to Chapter VII of the Charter at a stage of the conflict when it would still have been possible to stop the genocide. But UNAMIR II failed, in the final analysis, because of the unwillingness of UN member States to provide troops for it. Two months after the Security Council agreed to the mission, UNAMIR II still only had 550 troops instead of 5,500. In the case of Srebrenica, after the Security Council had established the safe areas the force commander requested 34,000 troops, but finally had to settle for a “light option” with a minimal troop reinforcement of around 7,600 that was to be defended, if necessary, by NATO air strikes.¹⁴

In its recommendations, the Rwanda Report points prominently to the need to improve the early warning capacity. It argues that it is essential to improve the ability of the UN Secretariat “to analyse and respond to information about possible conflicts, and its operational capability for preventive action”. In this context, the report suggests that “further enhancement of the cooperation between different Secretariat departments, UNSECOORD programmes and agencies and outside actors, including regional and subregional

¹³ Rwanda Report, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 22.

¹⁴ *United Nations Protection Force*, UN Department of Public Information, *September 1996*, see <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/>.

organizations, NGOs and the academic world, is essential".¹⁵ The new Report on Peacekeeping, to be presented to the Millennium Summit of the General Assembly in September 2000, should internalize the lessons from Rwanda, Srebrenica and other conflicts where the UN has missed opportunities for conflict prevention and management.

Regional organizations

The *Agenda for Peace* makes a claim for more active use of regional organizations under the UN Charter's Chapter VIII, especially since the United Nations has become overstretched and overburdened. The contributions of ASEAN in Cambodia, the Organization of American States and the Contadora Group in Central America, and the European Union, OSCE, NATO and the Western European Union in the former Yugoslavia have indicated a potential that could make a substantial contribution to peace and stability. But this potential is not sufficiently exploited.

The only regional organization which has both normative and operational capabilities in conflict prevention is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In 1990 the Charter of Paris for a New Europe mandated the OSCE to search for "ways of preventing, through political means, conflict which may emerge". As the incipient pan-European cooperative security structures were challenged and then invalidated by the Yugoslav wars, the OSCE realized that its role in conflict prevention lies more in the normative and soft security dimensions. In 1992, the OSCE created the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) to serve as a focal point in European early warning and dispute settlement. But, with minor exceptions, the CPC was bypassed during the explosion of deadly violence in the Balkans. States with vital stakes in the unfolding conflict apparently preferred to pursue their policies through the European Union, the UN and, ultimately, through international ad hoc contact groups.

A more successful initiative was the creation of a mandate for an OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, tasked to provide early warning and early prevention in minority conflicts. The

¹⁵ Rwanda Report, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 41.

role of the High Commissioner has been more successful than the CPC because of his ability to address structural causes of conflict directly with the parties concerned. His sustained engagement with the Baltic States, for instance, helped to defuse tension over the status of Russian minorities.

Lastly, the OSCE agreed to engage in long-term missions in potential trouble spots where latent tensions could erupt into violence and war. It currently has missions posted in 17 countries in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. These missions have been successful in countries such as Estonia, Latvia, Macedonia, Moldova and the Ukraine. Conversely, their presence failed to have the desired effect in other areas such as Bosnia, Chechnya, Georgia, Tajikistan and Kosovo where, despite their work, violence has prevailed. The experience of the OSCE in conflict prevention shows that long-term missions and discreet work on structural questions such as democracy-building, human and minority rights and the promotion of civil society are more suitable for regional organizations than attempts to find quick-fixes for the direct causes of conflict.

International contact groups

The reality of conflict prevention is that it is neither risk-free nor cheap. Preventive diplomacy is viable only if there are parties willing to pledge assistance and provide guarantees. Local parties in dispute almost always need outside backing to credibly guarantee the implementation of agreements. The States that are prepared to assume such responsibilities are primarily stakeholders in the hot spot areas. Their interests may be geopolitical or affected by the politically costly effects of violence, such as refugee flows, regional destabilization and pressure by exile groups. The cost factors, both politically and financially, will induce such States to give credible commitments. Referring to the unfolding Kosovo crisis in 1998, the *Economist* wisecracked that successful prevention “does not win votes, but failed intervention loses buckets of them”.¹⁶

¹⁶ *The Economist*, 25 June 1998, p. 51.

Consequently, the groupings and alignments of States and other international players depend very much on the interests involved in the potential conflict. States still prefer to act unilaterally or in concert with a few other States in order to maintain their freedom of action and ensure their effectiveness. This has led to the emergence of contact groups similar, in post-modernist form, to the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe. The selective or unilateral nature of such contact group arrangements, especially if they are the result of parochialism, can lead to conflict prevention policies tending to exclude small States and non-State entities.

A number of international contact groups emerged after the collapse of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The States with key interests in the region, such as France, Germany, Russia and the United States, turned to ad hoc crisis management after the European Union and the OSCE proved unable or unwilling to elicit the necessary political commitments for proactive engagement in the region.

At the international conference on the former Yugoslavia, held in London in 1992, the larger European countries and a representative of the European Union met together with Russia and the United States. This ad hoc conference, housed at the UN in Geneva, worked with the specific input of representatives of even smaller contact groups. At a later stage, when the war escalated to include Bosnia, the contact group was made up of four permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany, but without China. Lastly, when the violent conflict spread to Kosovo, a few Western States and Russia pursued a conflict management policy through the Rambouillet structure. After the failure of this process, Russia dropped out of the group and NATO intervened in a cut-and-run intervention in Kosovo without any UN or OSCE mandate. In hindsight, the NATO air strikes were the result of contact group actions that clearly lacked international legitimacy.

Kosovo is a good example of the downside of contact group arrangements. These are based on a trade-off between effectiveness and participation. Contact groups are more effective than international institutions precisely because there are fewer players and there is no red tape along with onerous decision-making. Also they create the

very visible front that is required for dealing with notorious opponents. Nevertheless, they do appear exclusionary to those States and organizations that are not admitted to this inner core. Furthermore, they neither have an institutional memory nor can they fall back on pre-existing contingency planning. Finally, contact groups often lack international legitimacy, an issue that becomes apparent when the group decides to use coercive measures.

In conclusion, contact groups have played essential roles in recent cases of conflict prevention and conflict management. Such groups usually emerge only after initial efforts of conflict prevention have failed and after States have chosen to short-cut international organizations, or alternatively when organizations refuse to take up the management of specific cases, as was the case with Operation Alba in 1997.¹⁷ These groups will always have to grapple with questions related to legitimacy and will in the end rely on regional institutions or the UN for the implementation of any agreement they may have worked out. Thus, instead of bypassing the UN, regional organizations and non-State agencies, they should develop better ways of using existing institutional organizations. This would give multilateral preventive actions a better chance of success.

The role of humanitarian organizations and NGOs

The international community's capacity to prevent conflict is still quite limited. These limitations stem from the "structural legacies of the Cold War restricting multilateral actions, while the growing number of interventions is a reflection of the proliferation of deadly internal conflicts".¹⁸ The increased number of internal armed conflicts reduces the role of States in conflict prevention; the traditional policy instruments of States, such as coercive diplomacy and deterrence, have lost much of their utility for that purpose. These are some of the reasons why non-governmental organizations are assuming an increasingly important role in the field of conflict prevention. While NGOs would

¹⁷ On 28 March 1997, the Security Council authorized the deployment of an Italian-led multinational military and humanitarian mission in Albania.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.* (note 8), p. 4.

be unable to perform the functions of the United Nations or sovereign States, they can usefully complement them.

In 1994 the UN Secretary-General recognized three distinct contributions that non-State entities could make in the broad field of conflict management and peace-building: "1. preventive diplomacy, because NGOs are familiar with the situation on the ground and are well placed to alert governments to nascent crises and emerging conflicts; 2. peacemaking, where NGOs can give humanitarian and social aid under perilous and difficult conditions; and 3. post-conflict peace-building, where NGOs can help fragile governments and destitute populations to find the confidence and the resources to make peace last".¹⁹

NGOs and other humanitarian organizations have the advantage of being in dispute-prone areas for years before conflict or violence actually breaks out. Their knowledge of local society and culture and the local reputation they have built up cannot be acquired instantly by outside entities that choose to get involved in that specific area once conflict has erupted. The essential role of NGOs in conflict prevention was acknowledged by the Commission on Global Governance in its report *Our Global Neighbourhood*. The report conceptualized the practises and challenges of global governance and promoted the recognition that "formal, intergovernmental mechanisms could be only one piece of a larger, evolving, and more dynamic mosaic".²⁰

A project initiated by the Catholic Relief Services and the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame (USA) examined the role of NGOs in conflict prevention. It identified the following areas where NGOs can enhance the impact of government and international organizations on early warning and prevention of internal conflict by: "1. increasing access to parties in conflict, and flow of information about them; 2. improving the comprehensiveness of response; 3. amplifying the impact of peace strategies through their own networking; and 4. creating conditions for great power engagement in larger scale preventive and rescue operations".²¹

¹⁹ UN Secretary-General's address at the 47th Annual Conference of NGOs, 1994.

²⁰ Edward C. Luck, "Blue ribbon power: Independent commissions and UN reform",

International Studies Perspectives, Vol. 1, Issue 1, April 2000, p. 99.

²¹ *Op. cit.* (note 8), p. 20.

The ICRC and other humanitarian agencies have played a crucial role in conflict prevention. For example, the ICRC agreed during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis to appoint neutral inspectors to check Soviet compliance with the commitment not to ship ballistic missiles to Cuba. This go-between role helped to ease tensions at that critical moment of superpower confrontation, even though the crisis was subsequently defused before the deployment of the inspectors was required.

With regard to internal armed conflicts, the ICRC can base its conflict prevention activities on the mandate entrusted to it by the XXIst International Conference of the Red Cross.²² It suggests that the ICRC can, in conjunction with the National Societies and governments of the countries concerned, “examine what contribution the Red Cross could make to preventing the outbreak of the conflict or achieving a cease-fire or cessation of hostilities”.

Most of the ICRC’s contributions to conflict prevention focus on containing the harmful effects of armed conflicts by keeping them to a minimum. According to René Kosirnik of the ICRC, it conducts a “preventive humanitarian diplomacy”. This includes in-depth analysis of the areas concerned, local networking, sensitizing of governments, authorities and civil society to their responsibilities under international humanitarian law, capacity-building of local partners and the organization of early warning systems.²³

The ICRC has frequently been able to negotiate the establishment of humanitarian safety zones, which were off limits to armed belligerents. Such zones have helped to prevent the escalation of violence and even, in some cases, to resolve the conflict. For example, the ICRC mediated a 24-hour truce during the revolution in the Dominican Republic in 1965. This served as the basis for extending the cessation of hostilities until it eventually became a permanent end to the conflict.²⁴ More recently, the ICRC managed to create

²² XXIst International Conference of the Red Cross (Istanbul, 1969), Resolution XXI: Contacts between National Societies in cases of armed conflicts.

²³ René Kosirnik, *Some questions and answers regarding the ICRC and preventive*

actions, Round Table on Preventive Action, Copenhagen, ICRC, Geneva, p. 6.

²⁴ Yves Sandoz, “The Red Cross and peace: Realities and limits”, *Journal for Peace Research*, No. 3, 1987, p. 293.

humanitarian buffer zones in Mexico in 1994 between the Chiapas insurgents and the Mexican Federal Army.

The main dilemma for humanitarian organizations, and in particular for the ICRC, in protracted internal conflicts is the need to preserve absolute impartiality towards the belligerents and non-discrimination towards the victims. This is why it may be risky for humanitarian agencies to get too closely associated with a peace process: if the process stalls, then they are implicated *nolens volens*. It is a constant concern of humanitarian NGOs to be able to continue their work after international conflict prevention efforts fail, and especially then.

Also, there is always the danger that humanitarian support may do more to prolong human suffering, namely when humanitarian assistance is diverted to support warring parties. A study on conflict prevention has shown that “aid has been often co-opted by belligerent groups and thus encouraged conflict”.²⁵ The same study also argues that certain development programmes and financial assistance “have indirectly contributed to the exacerbation of horizontal inequalities, and hence to the probability of violence”.²⁶

A lack of in-depth analysis of the socio-political situation and inadequate coordination among relief agencies and other outside entities may enable warring factions to play one off against another. Thus, early warning and preventive measures make sense only if they are carried out in close coordination with other outside entities. It is for this purpose that the Carnegie Commission recommends annual coordination meetings among the NGOs: “The leadership of the major global humanitarian NGOs should agree to meet regularly — at a minimum on an annual basis — to share information, reduce unnecessary redundancies, and promote shared norms of engagement in crises. This collaboration should lead directly to the wider nongovernmental commitment to network with indigenous NGOs in regions of potential crisis, human rights groups, humanitarian organizations, development

²⁵ “From reaction to prevention: Opportunities for the UN system in the new millennium”, *Conference Report*, International

Peace Academy, New York, 2000, p. 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

organizations, and those involved in track-two efforts to help prevent and resolve conflict".²⁷

Conclusions

The whole decade of the 1990s was a decade of missed opportunities for preventive action. This is partly due to the fact that many States are still not prepared to go beyond paying lip service to conflict prevention and conflict management. Conflict prevention is not risk free, nor is it free of political and financial costs. Furthermore, the role of the State has lost some of its importance to other players, owing to the internal nature of today's deadly conflicts. Thus the traditional policy instruments of States, such as coercive diplomacy and deterrence, have lost much of their utility for conflict prevention.

Today, effective prevention requires a comprehensive, multidimensional and coherent strategy. In this context, a multilateral approach to conflict prevention appears useful and even imperative: the comparative advantage of each organization can in aggregate make the difference needed to defeat the scourge of violence. This article has shown that a combined approach of various players is possible and feasible, but joint actions on the premise of joint prescriptions remains unrealistic. For instance, quiet diplomacy, track-two activities, local networking and discreet work among rival groups require low-key conduct which may not be compatible with high-level carrot and stick policies.

It is, however, possible to engage in a useful division of labour by differentiating between structural prevention and preventive action to ward off an imminent escalation of violence. For example, long-term missions and socio-political work on questions such as democracy-building, human and minority rights and the promotion of civil society are more suitable for regional and international organizations and NGOs. In turn, only very few such organizations can rapidly and effectively respond to an unravelling crisis. Such a rapid response needs accurate and credible warning, especially in the light of potential

²⁷ *Preventing Deadly Conflict*, *op. cit.* (note 2), Chapter 5.

large-scale killings and attempts of genocide. The Rwanda Report has shown that warning is essential for the political mobilization of the international community.

Finally, the involvement in conflict prevention and management reveals the dilemma between mitigating a humanitarian crisis and finding a long-term solution. The current literature on conflict is afflicted by the dangerous argument that “war should have a chance” and play itself out rather than being “sustained by humanitarian assistance”.²⁸ The humanitarian organizations cannot escape the debate about conflict-solving versus humanitarian relief, and the agenda of States pursuing geopolitical objectives may not be compatible with humanitarian efforts of international organizations and NGOs. Too close an association with regional powers or contact groups may lead to the loss of credibility of humanitarian organizations, especially if the formal peace process turns sour. The humanitarian organizations are always concerned to ensure that their work can continue, particularly in cases where international conflict prevention efforts fail.

The ICRC is one of the main organizations that have to cope with the effects of prevention failures of the international community. Nevertheless, close cooperation with other entities in connection with an internal conflict should be desirable for the ICRC as long as it does not affect its impartiality. This message comes across loud and clear in the statement by former ICRC President Cornelio Sommaruga, who argued that comprehensive conflict prevention is possible as long as “all parties are taking due account of the respective responsibilities, mandates and spheres of competence of each party”.²⁹

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²⁸ Edward N. Luttwak, “Give war a chance”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1999, pp. 36-44.

²⁹ Keynote address by Dr. Sommaruga, ICRC President, 23 June 1998, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, see <http://www.gcsp.ch>.

Résumé

Prévention et règlement de conflits : les limites du multilatéralisme

par FRED TANNER

Au cours des années 90, l'intérêt de la recherche et de la pratique s'est tourné vers la prévention de conflits, c'est-à-dire toute activité tendant à gérer ou à résoudre des situations conflictuelles avant qu'elles ne dégèrent en affrontement ouvert et violent. Cet article examine les possibilités et les chances de succès d'actions de prévention entreprises, soit par un État, soit dans un contexte multilatéral. L'expérience des dernières années démontre clairement que les États ne souhaitent pas s'exposer dans un conflit qui ne les concerne pas directement. Les conflits d'aujourd'hui en appellent donc à des stratégies plus complexes, et seule une approche multilatérale a une chance d'aboutir à des résultats satisfaisants. Il existe aujourd'hui un grand nombre d'organisations gouvernementales et non gouvernementales — universelles et régionales, grandes et petites —, chacune avec un mode d'action bien distinct, ce qui permet l'engagement de l'une ou de l'autre, selon les données de la situation.