



[Vol. 22, No. 3 \(October 1994\)](#)

Preventive Alternatives to Conflict

by John Eberlee

The international community should place less emphasis on UN peacekeeping and more on development strategies that promote good governance, in response to the spread of armed conflicts around the world, said speakers at an April IDRC symposium on peacekeeping, peacemaking and aid.

Against most expectations, conflict between and within states has increased rather than decreased since the Cold War ended. In 1992 and 1993, 160 conflicts involving either violence or the threat of violence dotted the globe, including 33 in the states of the former Soviet Union. "Conflicts today are more often between peoples than over ideologies and it's more likely that future conflicts will centre on entitlements and on provisions than over political hegemony water in the Middle East being one example", said Keith Bezanson, president of IDRC.

According to Major General Lewis MacKenzie, who retired from the Canadian army in 1992 after serving as Chief of Staff to the United Nations Protection Force in Yugoslavia, more peacekeeping missions were launched in the past five years than in the last 40 years. Meanwhile, peacekeepers have been forced into new roles, such as assisting aid workers, often without adequate resources.

"In most cases, it wasn't premeditated", he said. "The UN's involvement in humanitarian activities really hit the spotlight after we led the Kurds down the garden path after the Gulf War. The UN, in its wisdom, passed a tough resolution that authorized the use of force to provide some element of protection and also to feed them".

DANGEROUS PRECEDENT

The operation succeeded, but set a difficult and dangerous precedent. In Bosnia and Somalia, the uneasy marriage between peacekeepers and aid workers has placed lives at risk. Moreover, the total bill for the peacekeeping missions has greatly exceeded the value of the aid they were designed to protect.

In the case of Bosnia, humanitarian assistance began on a small-scale and was initiated by four soldiers, including MacKenzie. He explained that in 1991, with Serbia and Croatia at war, a ceasefire was arranged that placed 14,000 UN peacekeeping troops into the occupied areas of Croatia, where the Serbs are in the majority, and a headquarters in Sarajevo.

The UN provided no troops to support (headquarters). "Within three weeks of our arrival, we were forced out of Sarajevo and into Belgrade after the international community left. We had no mandate and no resources, but we felt professionally embarrassed. So we decided to ask the Serbs for the airport in Sarajevo, to bring in food and medicine. It worked within minutes."

After MacKenzie left Sarajevo in August of 1992, the UN expanded its operations to include all of Bosnia. Since there were not enough troops to maintain a presence throughout the country, they ended up escorting

humanitarian convoys.

"This, from my perspective, is a dumb idea because people don't interfere with humanitarian convoys with artillery and sniper fire, mortars and tanks. They interfere by sniping women and children in the street. One person stands in front of you and warns that if you drive one more foot down the road, his buddies over the next hill will cut 20 throats", said MacKenzie.

"You've then got three choices", he said. "You can leave with your tail between your legs. You can keep driving and let them cut. Or you can resist them, which means you're no longer a peacekeeper, you're now taking sides."

"Ideally, peacekeepers should leave the job of distributing humanitarian aid to NGOs and limit their contact with them", said MacKenzie. "In situations like Bosnia, where it is dramatically apparent that there's no peace to keep, peacekeepers ultimately are going to be associated with one side or another. The moment that [NGOs] have a direct linkage with the peacekeepers, then they are tainted and are no longer impartial, and that is death."

He added that it is unrealistic to expect that most of the aid sent to war zones will get to the people who really need it. "If there is peace to keep, you can deliver humanitarian aid. But when there is no peace to keep, most of the aid goes to soldiers and their families, or ends up on the black market. If you get 50% through, you are doing really well", said MacKenzie.

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE CONFLICT

While the world looks to peacekeepers to resolve existing conflicts, more resources should be put into preventing conflict, said Bernard Wood, director of development cooperation at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in France. "What's needed", he said, "are development strategies that aim to reduce the sources of conflict in societies or, at least, to equip them to manage those sources more effectively."

Wood said the root causes of conflict often lie in under-development, but are rarely simple. "Economic scarcity, even extreme poverty, do not necessarily generate conflict, although perceptions of great inequality may do so if they take hold in a society where such inequality is not culturally sanctioned."

It follows that the key to preventing armed conflict is to successfully manage competing interests and loyalties within and between societies. "This is where development strategies placing primacy on good governance and participation offer a realistic if not an easy hope for bringing the joint promise of peace and development closer together", he argued.

Through better governance, political power is made less absolute power, and the struggle for political power less of a life-or-death struggle. "By restricting the economic functions of state power to the vital tasks, the potentials for corrosive corruption and divisive favouritism are reduced. By achieving higher standards of respect for human rights and the rule of law, a sense of shared citizenship can grow in the place of violent abuse", said Wood. According to Wood, some attempts were made to strengthen the government apparatus in Yugoslavia, just prior to its breakup. "At an international seminar in Ottawa, in June 1991, a number of interesting constitutional proposals were raised that would today be welcomed with open arms by most of the people in the warring republics and by the international community", he said.

But at the time there was no will to focus on creative political solutions as an alternative to conflict and no will for the international community to combine its resources for that end. The costs of preventive action then, of course, would have been negligible beside the horrendous costs that are still being paid on every conceivable scale.

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ISSN 0315-9981. This magazine is listed in the Canadian Magazine Index.

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