

Responding to crises in the African Great Lakes

by Glynne Evans



photograph: UNHCR/26112/12, 1996/R. Chelassani

A recently published Adelphi Paper examines the international responses to the ethnic conflict in Burundi and Rwanda from 1993-97 and its overspill into neighbouring Zaire. This extract provides details of four concrete proposals.

A UN Centre for Conflict Analysis

Before coherent response to conflict is possible, clarity and unity of understanding among key international players are essential. A practical proposal to counter the time pressures and to promote unity of understanding would be to set up a Conflict Analysis Centre (CAC) within the UN Secretariat, possibly reporting directly to the Secretary-General. This would be responsible for policy analysis, not operations, and its success would be measured by the extent to which its work informed policy decisions across the world. It would require a dedicated Assistant Secretary-General, with good credentials as an academic and diplomat, at the centre of a team drawn from a

variety of disciplines, including diplomacy, political science, the UNDP, the media, the military, business and psychology. Such a unit would provide the intellectual framework for policy response, whether by the UN, the OAU, NATO, the OSCE or the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF) in a contact group.

The Centre's advice would be independent; hence ideally it should be funded voluntarily by states and foundations, rather than from the UN regular budget. Indeed, a direct (and not exclusively funding) link with a respected external organisation could help protect the CAC from the normal push and pull of the UN business. Structures would be light; the CAC would commission studies from

acknowledged experts in whatever field it thought relevant. Conflicting points of view, not uncommon among academics, could be used to positive effect to establish the parameters of the problems.

The Centre would:

- ◆ track academic work and policy responses, not least in the areas of future conflict;
- ◆ promote lessons learned, seminars and workshops;
- ◆ conduct a dialogue; and
- ◆ build good working relations with other international organisations and arrangements, including the OAU, the ARF, NATO, the World Bank and the EU planning cell.

The experience of skilled negotiators would be recorded and synthesised. Once its quality and links with other bodies were established, the CAC could supersede or at least inhibit some of the competition between international organisations that has been so marked a feature of international response to conflicts.

Enhancing abilities to respond to internal conflict

Internal conflict is complex. Lessons that could be applicable from Bosnia to Burundi may fail to be learned or effectively used because of a lack of consistent cross-fertilisation within a foreign ministry, between military and civilians, or between organisations and governments and expert external analysts. The Scandinavians have developed a useful pattern of roving ambassadors for peacekeeping and for Africa. This enables the individuals to travel widely, learn by direct experience, maintain useful personal contacts with the NGO community, and be aware of developing lateral

trends, whether on the ground or academically. US special envoys are traditionally more targeted on a country or a specific negotiation, for example in Mozambique. An EU special envoy, also sent to a particular area, represents an embryonic common foreign and security policy, which has yet to prove itself operationally and may thus have less influence than an emissary from one of the major players, such as the UK, France or Germany.

It has perhaps not been coincidental that Norway, not a member of the EU, has so regularly backed productive track-two negotiations. The Norwegian parliament directly assigns part of its aid budget to its Foreign Ministry for conflict management and activities relating to peacekeeping. With a political ambassador with a wide-ranging remit freed of the need for traditional bureaucratic brokering on expenditure in foreign policy, Norway is able to respond swiftly, without publicity and to good effect, as it did in the Middle East and in Burundi through discreet funding for San Egidio. The model could be followed more widely. The UK, in turn, since 1993 has developed a widely acknowledged model for 'peacekeeping training' jointly between the Foreign Office and the Army Staff College at Camberley. This is designed to break down communication barriers between, for example, military and diplomatic personnel, UN officials, NGOs and the media who might be present on the ground in responding to a conflict situation. They work together in groups, under pressure, to develop the mix of responses to a complex scenario. Although national responses differ, key international players should be readier to draw in expert experience from outside, rather than to assume that their own colleagues have covered the ground.

Doctrinal responses to internal conflict

In a situation like that in Burundi, projecting overwhelming force and air power does not deliver peace. Heavy manpower on the ground is needed to protect one group of civilians against armed attack from others in an ethnically mixed environment. This is unlikely to be available from the West. The complexity of a 'humanitarian intervention', as in eastern Zaire, may not be fully understood at the political level. Since there will be further such

proposals, writers of military doctrine could usefully bring out the implications, in terms of large and long-lasting deployments, and the alternatives of taking sides by backing a local figure or of indirectly supporting local action. Another option may simply be to observe or 'bear witness'. Amnesty International reports, even on Burundi, have had an impact. Unarmed observers such as those of the OAU or the UN human-rights monitors in Rwanda, may be better placed to inhibit generalised abuse than structured units, and tend to be more reliable than some of the less experienced NGOs.

Collaborating to promote policies for peacebuilding

An imaginative plan for peacebuilding, reconciliation through reconstruction and economic integration throughout the sub-region - and allowing for the return of the remaining refugees - could be the key to stability in the African Great Lakes. Neither the UN nor the EU alone coped comfortably with the policies of overlapping internal conflicts. UN strength, with the OAU in support, could lie in gathering international backing for an overall peace settlement and in fielding a strong human rights monitoring team for the entire sub-region. The UN family should also work together with the World Bank to provide the analytical framework for a sub-regional plan encompassing economic development, an effective indigenous system of justice to end the culture of impunity, and the return of refugees. Such a task-force-based approach should be standard practice and should be brought into play when the new Conflict Analysis Centre identified the potential for violent social conflict. In contrast to the somewhat aspirational aims of the EU and its continuing focus on emergency assistance during the period 1994-97, real European strengths in terms of development aid, technical assistance and trade preferences could also support such a plan. Pending such a plan, donors should be able to deploy modest 'rapid-reaction finance' for immediate needs to help fragile governments create an effective judiciary and police force, financial and taxation structures and to start rebuilding a shattered economy.

Conclusion

Between 1994 and 1997, key players in the African Great Lakes appeared to lose confidence in the West's commitment to help find solutions to their problems. Guilt over the genocide in Rwanda provoked a huge outpouring of humanitarian assistance rather than any political creativity in ad-

'The UN like a successful corporation, must periodically adapt its product line to changing demands.'

Former UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping, Kofi Annan, 1996.

dressing the problem of the refugee camps and fundamental instability. Western attention was fitful and too often prompted by media interest, lapsing when the pictures were absent from the television screens. Instead, a group of powerful leaders in the region demonstrated their clear determination to start setting the agenda themselves. Museveni, Kagame, Kabila (and even Meles) had long-standing ties and had all come to power by a military route. These were 'home-grown' solutions from decisive leaders. Traditional Western patterns may be inappropriate here. Instead, non-party democracy and a strong element of sub-regional cooperation, politically and perhaps economically, may be the models for the future.

Glynne Evans is the British Ambassador to Chile. She wrote Responding to crises in the African Great Lakes while on sabbatical at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in 1996-97. The opinions expressed in the paper are the author's own and should not be taken as an expression of British government policy.

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