

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

Center for Preventive Action

1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20036
tel 202.509.8400 fax 202.509.8490 www.cfr.org

The Center for Preventive Action Annual Symposium
Preventive Priorities for a New Era
Session Three: Enhancing Capacities to Respond
Elisabeth Kvitashvili Talking Points
December 9, 2008
New York, New York

The Challenge

Fortunately, when Paul called me last week to ask me to sit in for Gayle Smith I had read “The Price of Prevention” which she and a colleague had recently released. I say fortunately, because getting ahead of global crises and trends is something that I and a number of my colleagues at the US Agency for International Development (USAID) have been attempting to do, perhaps too quietly, for a couple of years now and I’ll run through some of what we’ve been up to in a moment.

But first, as the Human Security Report and other analyses have documented, we have witnessed a decline in the number of internal violent conflicts since the end of the cold war, though with an up-tick most recently.

More detailed analysis indicates that this decline is primarily attributable to speedier termination of such conflicts once they start, especially those that are less than 5 years old.

Several analysts have argued that these positive results are a function of growing global resolve to respond to the outbreak of violence rapidly and energetically as manifested in the greater use of robust peacekeeping operations.

At the same time, there has been no similar success in dealing with conflict prevention. Today, as in every year since the end of World War II, on average one or two new conflicts begin.

For more than a decade, (starting with the Balkans conflict) the international community has spent enormous energy developing a body of “Do No Harm” best practices, policies and procedures dealing with crisis response. In USAID, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance-OFDA-with its Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DART) is a world class first responder and represents the most expeditionary type of civilian response.

The challenge for the global community in general, and for the US government more particularly, is to find the same type of resolve and fashion the same effective tools for conflict, including genocide, prevention that it has for disaster response and post-conflict reconstruction.

US Response to the Challenge: Present and Future

Over the past six years, the US Government, but especially my own Agency, has been working steadily on the conflict prevention agenda, both improving our own capacity and that of conflict-prone countries to identify and respond to conflicts before they become serious. This modest, but significant, progress is easily lost in the preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan and their stabilization and post-conflict reconstruction imperatives.

One of the most visible expressions of the US focus on conflict prevention was the creation in 2002 of USAID's Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (CMM). Since its creation, it has become the primary locus of US conflict prevention efforts, serving both as a resource for USAID's development activities, but also to the broader interagency as it strives to fashion a more whole-of-government approach that incorporates development, diplomacy, intelligence and security capabilities.

Over this period, CMM and its interagency partners have managed to put in place many of the basic building blocks of a robust conflict prevention capability: Some examples include--

Accurate early warning models and various watch and alert lists that identify countries at risk and track their evolution over time. Some of our lists, which are unclassified, are fed into the classified NIC list. Others such as the Famine Early Warning System-FEWS Food Security and Assistance Forecast, allows us to pre-position or ramp up food and agriculture assistance before a food crises arises.

USAID also funds the International Crises Group which among other things releases a monthly bulletin called Crisis Watch on current and potential conflicts around the world.

Sound conflict assessment frameworks and analysis procedures for distilling a country's conflict dynamics—both destabilizing conflict drivers and stabilizing mitigating factors and prioritizing responses to help fill identified gaps. Indeed, this past August, the Reconstruction and Stabilization Policy Coordinating Committee, co-chaired by S/CRS and the NSC, approved the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (CAF) for use as the common tool for interagency conflict analysis. And our military colleagues have incorporated this civilian framework into doctrine including the COIN and Stability Operations Field Manuals. The CAF was turned into a tactical tool now used by various military units in Iraq and Afghanistan. The British military has used the TCAF in its village level analysis in Helmand for example.

A new template for interagency strategic planning at the country level. The 2008 pilot phase demonstrated that this template could be an effective tool for articulating a coherent conflict-prevention approach to US foreign assistance in those countries that are at risk.

An expanding collection of guidance or toolkits on effective programming to prevent, manage and mitigate violence ranging from natural resource related conflict to peace processes support to the role of religion and religious actors in conflict.

In addition, USAID, led by CMM, has funded support to cutting-edge research on topics such as the role of diaspora in conflict prevention and negative trends in urbanization; the start-up of an effective training program on conflict analysis at the introductory and graduate level; the creation of a cadre of foreign service officers who will focus on issues of conflict and crisis response—and prevention—throughout their careers. And, importantly there has been significant outreach to and sustained engagement with the World Bank, UNDP, DFID and others in the donor and NGO communities on a range of common peacebuilding issues. But these are just baby steps and clearly insufficient.

If USAID and our interagency partners have made this sort of meaningful progress on conflict prevention in an environment of inconsistent policy-level interest and meager resources, imagine what could be done if just the existing efforts at early warning, conflict analysis, strategic planning, effective programming, training, research and donor coordination were more robustly staffed and funded? If policy makers understood the financial cost benefit of early response, if the moral imperative to prevent genocide was first among equals in the policy debates, this alone would produce significant and tangible benefits.

But instituting a robust culture and practice of prevention will require some new leadership, political will and vision from the incoming Administration. Above all, the Administration needs to make both rhetorical and organizational commitments to prevention. The rhetorical commitment to prevention is easy; translating the rhetoric into action will be more difficult as prioritizing prevention will mean other items will get less attention.

Perhaps the strongest signal the new Administration could send would be to create a senior position within the National Security Council to serve as the focal point and chief advocate for prevention to include strategic or contingency planning. Such a senior level position would be important as a signal that the new Administration has as much interest in preventing conflict and tracking negative trends than previous ones have had in picking up the pieces. Practically, such a senior official could help overcome some of the bureaucratic inertia that stymies any effort to new ways for conducting foreign policy. Early warning would trigger a policy review that would then lead if required to a strategic planning process, perhaps whole-of-government, or perhaps not, for an early response. The policy review should lead to a dialog with the Hill on preventive steps under contemplation.

Equally important, such a senior administration official is well placed to help rebalance the civilian and military roles in prevention. At the moment, the historically diplomatic and development goal of preventing conflict has become entangled in the military mission to prevent the emergence of security threats. Military force, while certainly necessary on occasion, cannot solve the fundamental problems faced by most of the failing states where we work.

Early intervention to nip negative trends in the bud, prevent the emergence or spread of violent conflict and importantly, as noted by Gayle, prevent the reemergence of violence should be the purview of the civilian agencies who have the albeit somewhat insignificant, but nonetheless critical early detection and response skills.

Sustained commitment within the executive branch will also be important to lead negotiations with the Congress to provide greater funding flexibility for prevention efforts. Certainly more unearmarked funding for at-risk counties would provide important incentives to ensure coherent and well-targeted responses. Indeed, if OFDA has its yearly unallocated disaster response fund -- we should have an equally robust and flexible Conflict Prevention Pool to encourage early response to eye-raising trends.

In addition to strengthening the ability of the US Government to support conflict prevention, it is important to strengthen the same capacities in partner countries and the regional organizations of which they are members. Continental organizations, such as the African Union, or regional groupings, such as ECOWAS or ASEAN, would benefit from additional support in realizing their desires to become more effective peacebuilding vehicles. However, supporting the development of these capacities would require consistent diplomatic as well as technical engagement.

We have better forecasting and planning tools and more understanding within State and USAID about the need to focus on trends such as the food crisis and global warming. However, the youth bulge and its connection to increasing violence in urban settings in places like Casablanca and Nairobi; Karachi and Kano, creates new pressures and we don't currently have an environment which encourages creative thinking and

necessary risk-taking. For the tools that we need to develop—beyond traditional preventive diplomacy—require new ways of thinking and a new architecture for dealing with these crises. Development as usual may not be the answer, so more USAID staff responding in the same old way won't necessarily do the trick.

To quote someone with whom I've had epic battles but from whom I've learned enormously, we can't use our 20th century tools for 21st century problems.

And although conflict isn't new, our tools need to reflect the evolution which has occurred within conflict settings where spoilers play by different rules and don't respond to our traditional means for dealing with conflict—Somalia is a case in point.

So yes, we need to re-fashion some our 20th century tools so they are relevant, create some new ones—including a Conflict Response Pool and a more modern architecture—but we also need staff working in an environment which challenges them to think beyond our traditional boundaries to respond early to looming crises and, remembering that our role is secondary to that of the host country and its people. Hopefully our imposed solutions unfortunately tinged sometimes with an imperial flavor are something for the history books. Thank you.