Peace and war in the third world

Nicholas McGowan

The media's myopic gaze at American military action internationally masks the true state of emerging peace around the globe.

The second most powerful man in the United Nations bureaucracy, Frenchman Jean-Marie Guehenno, recently wrote that the number of people killed in battle around the globe is at an almost hundred-year low.

"There is less war than there used to be," or so Guehenno – Kofi Annan's chief peacekeeper in command of some 84,000 blue helmets in 18 peacekeeping missions worldwide, would have us believe.

The claim from the United Nations is potentially controversial at a time when we appear almost engulfed by conflict around the globe. It is a claim nonetheless that cannot be so easily dismissed, and for which there is mounting evidence.

Although new conflicts do continue to start - the UN points to just 25 places that are now at war around the globe, down markedly from the peak of 50 in the early 1990s. In simple terms, for every new conflict that starts, as in Nepal, two olds ones are ending.

In many countries peace is now establishing a firm foothold. A devastating and more than decade-old civil war in Burundi, which had claimed the lives of 200,000 civilians, has this year ended with the ascendancy

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of a Hutu president and installation of an elected government. Elsewhere on African soil, Liberians are rebuilding their shattered society. More than 100,000 Liberian fighters have been demobilized and their deadly weapons destroyed. In Sierra Leone and in East Timor international peacekeepers are packing their bags and going home.

In his report to world leaders during September's Global Summit in New York, Annan articulated the need for collective action in what he described as 'a world of interconnected threats and challenges'.

The United Nations argues that one part of the reason why conflicts are ending is economic development, which has lifted much of East and South East Asia out of the conflict trap. The other part of the answer is that nations collectively are getting better at dealing with conflict in places where there has been no growth.

Increasingly, the world's political leaders are coming to comprehend the vital link between development and security–the lynchpin of sustainable peace–and the dramatic consequences that can manifest as a result of the chronic poverty produced by under-development.

Of those conflicts that remain, common threads exist in each which enables policy makers to identify a patchwork of potentially troubling states. Frequently referred to as failed, or 'failing states', they are predominately characterised by civil wars, fought in the poorest nations, and often where the state's institutions – the apparatus of government – have collapsed or are severely weakened to the point of irrelevance.

Internationalists are coming to accept that rarely can these wars be ended by outsiders alone. Rather, states acting together now have at their disposal a range of tools with which they can help deprive oxygen from a conflict and pave a path toward sustainable, long term peace. There is no

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quick fix, and often the attempts are multi-dimensional, which means they are complicated and require sustained international support for decades and not merely years. Warlords can be pressured, sanctions imposed, mediation provided, ceasefires encouraged, treaties entered, transitional institutions established, peacekeepers dispatched, humanitarian aid disbursed and additional incentives offered. It is the proverbial stick and carrot, though not necessarily in that order.

With peace taking as much as ten years to take root, states like Afghanistan and Congo which teeter between war and peace are not yet out of the woods. But even in these places there is real hope.

In Afghanistan a future generation of children are back in school–and that includes girls–while the adoption of a new constitution preceded by a nationwide democratic election marked the turning point from autocratic rule to majority governance. In the Congo, the vast nation is preparing for the first elections in 40 years while rebel militia are on the run following robust patrolling by peacekeepers in the country's troubled east.

Elsewhere the situation is rather more precarious, though all the more worthy therefore for continued international perseverance.

In the strife-torn Caribbean state of Haiti the re-establishment of democratic structures and stabilisation of local security remains fragile, often reaching the point of breakdown. Across the Indian Ocean, Africa's Cote d'Ivoire remains at a critical standoff between warring factions poised ready to split the nation in two, while efforts to end the killing in Sudan remains bogged-down in a geopolitical quagmire despite the obvious humanitarian imperatives.

As peacekeepers know all too well, the risk of a state falling back into the conflict trap remains disturbingly high. The concern is supported – indeed echoed – by research undertaken by the World Bank. According to the

institution, half of all countries emerging from civil unrest fall back into a conflict cycle within five years.

But even in these states there is some good news. They previously stood little chance of attracting the international economic and developmental support they required, particularly if they were oil and resource poor. However, since the mutation of domestic terrorism with international ambition, the rules of the game have now changed.

Prior to the collapse of the Berlin Wall, these failed states were seen by the West, and others, solely through the prism of Cold War geopolitics. In today's war of terror they have become potentially dangerous, indeed deadly, entities in their own right. The pinhole stare of the world's intelligence agencies–and their political masters–is now regularly fixed on these failing and failed states.

The World Bank has identified some 30 such states considered 'low income countries under stress'. Tony Blair's international watchdog–the Department for International Development–has named publicly 46 'fragile' states of concern; while their Atlantic cousins place the number of failed states close to 20.

Annan himself has warned that "ignoring failed States creates problems that sometimes come back to bite us".

But when is a state considered to be failing or failed? At what point, if any, does one or a number of states – under the guise of friend or foe – act militarily and intervene in the so-called greater-good?

Often distinguishing between a turbulent period in a country's organic political cycle – which might include mass-demonstrations, minority governance, or a temporary inability to deliver public services – from outright failure, is, history directs us, fraught with errors of subjective and medio-

cre analysis of intelligence Indeed, at what point does intervention become the trigger for collapse? When is invasion the fracture of an independent state and not its savior of sovereignty?

Just as legal precedent tells us that 'no decision' is a decision, so too we need to understand better that, internationally speaking, no action is an action. In the course of history this inaction has, with scary repetition, provided a platform for the exhibition of man's horrifying inhumanity to man.

Precedents and history aside, important inroads are now been made in the pursuit of peace, armed not with guns, but rather with the knowledge that development and economic growth are the core drivers in cementing newfound peace.

The establishment by United Nations Member States at this year's World Summit – including Australia - to create a Peacebuilding Commission and Trust Fund – for which $50 million has already been pledged - will go part of the way in addressing the broader question of how the international community can best assist failing states to bridge the poverty to development divide. Advancement in this area should also progress cognizant of the need to ensure that where gains are forged they are done so in the broadest possible way. An uneven spread of development growth – because of corruption, nepotism and mismanagement - can hamper the chances of breaking the conflict trap in the same way as an absence does so.

As Guehenno so adroitly put it when referring to Burundi's newfound peace - 'Perhaps for the first time in history, the reach of collective peacekeeping is no longer exceeding its grasp'.

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