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The Prevention of Violent Conflict

There is a time, when nations shall not learn war anymore, but shall come to that which shall take away the occasion of wars. – George Fox

Introduction: From “Reaction” to “Prevention”

The past century has been the most violent in human history. The costs of war in human lives and squandered resources have been extensive. Over the last century over 200 million people were killed in 250 wars and genocidal onslaughts, more people than were killed in warfare in the past two thousand years¹. The failure of the UN, governments, and the global community to effectively respond to war and genocide, and the failure of the end of the Cold War to provide a peace dividend in the 1990s make it apparent that the existing mechanisms for preventing war are inadequate or nonexistent.

This briefing paper will outline prevention history, emerging security strategies, current movements, and the outlook of the future the prevention of violent conflict.

The UN and the Prevention of Violent Conflict

Starting after the end of the Cold War, the UN published *An Agenda for Peace* in 1992, which quickly became a milestone in the UN’s peacebuilding work. The Secretary General called for greater efforts at all levels to integrate and coordinate prevention approaches within the UN system, and called for a synchronizing of isolated activities. Since the publication of *An Agenda for Peace*, the Secretary General has designated the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) as the focal point for prevention efforts and created the Trust Fund for Preventive Action. In 1999, he released his annual report, *The Prevention of War and Disaster*, calling for more effective prevention strategies.

What is the prevention of violent conflict?

The peaceful prevention of violent conflict is a paradigm for addressing conflict issues, as well as a set of policies for building national and global security. It begins with the premise that preventing the outbreak of war and deadly conflict is more humane, less costly, and more effective than responding after violence has already erupted.

ECNL booklet “Peaceful Prevention of Deadly Conflict”

Highlights in UN Prevention Initiatives

- 1992: An Agenda for Peace**
- 1999: Prevention of War and Disaster**, a report of the UN Secretary General.
- 2000: Panel on UN Peace Operations**, “Brahimi” Report.
Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.
- 2001: PREVENTION OF ARMED CONFLICT**, an annual report by the UN Secretary General.
Security Council Resolution 1366 on prevention’s role in international peace and security.
- 2003: Resolution 57/337 on the Prevention of Armed Conflict** adopted by the General Assembly.
- 2004: A Special Rapporteur for the Prevention of Genocide**, a new position in the UN, is

Since the turn of the century, the UN has increased its focus on prevention. In 2000, it commissioned a high level

panel on UN Peace Operations. The panel, composed of individuals experienced in various aspects of conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, assessed the shortcomings of the peace operations system and made recommendations for change. The Security Council also passed a resolution recognizing the important role that women play in conflict prevention. The following year, the Secretary General released a new report entitled *Prevention of Armed Conflict*, which reviewed the progress achieved in developing the conflict prevention capacity of the UN, and another resolution was passed by the Security Council recognizing the crucial role that conflict prevention plays. After 2 years of deliberation, the General Assembly passed a resolution (57/337) on the prevention of armed conflict in 2003, reflecting Member States commitment to seriously engage the issue. Departments of the UN, such as the UN Development Program, engage prevention in their

¹ Global Action to Prevent War, Program Statement, 2003. Available online at www.globalactionpw.org.

activities, and many departments are beginning to view and plan their work through a prevention lens.

A New Security Strategy

To effectively address current and future threats to peace and security, a new strategy for the peaceful prevention of violent conflict is needed.

UN peacekeeping operations often enter a conflict during the “eleventh hour” when conflicts have already reached the stages of violence and armed aggression. This is the most difficult time to intervene. Implementing violence prevention measures is difficult, and operations are dangerous for peacekeeping troops. At this stage, the best UN peacekeepers can do is create a safe space for other international, regional, and local actors to begin reweaving the fabric of a stable society.

A shift in security strategy would shift from military responses to conflict, and instead invest in the development and early application of peaceful alternatives to war. Such a strategy is emerging through governmental, UN and civil society initiatives, and through local grassroots movements. A new strategy needs to span global policy making and local realities, incorporating lessons learned and best practices. Regional violence prevention work provides important lessons and models to incorporate into this new emerging security strategy.

Such a strategy needs to move beyond the ad hoc arrangements between civil society and the UN, and towards mechanisms of engagement and generalized guidelines for cooperation applicable in diverse situations. International strategies can be more general and overarching, while regional strategies need to take into account different needs and focuses depending on local situations.

Firefighting

An example of a paradigm shift from reaction to prevention

Many years ago, firefighting in New York City focused more on reaction than prevention. Fires broke out frequently, and there were ineffective mechanisms for addressing the causes of fires. Avoidable damage to properties and loss of human life was greater than it is today.

The fire department made a fundamental paradigm shift away from fire emergency response toward fire prevention. It changed the way it approached its job and turned more energy and resources into public education, early detection systems, better building codes, and addressing some of the most persistent causes of fire. They saved lives and, over a few short years had fewer and less devastating fires to respond to.

A similar approach to conflict could save lives and reduce the occasion of war.



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In response to the need for a new global security, a new discipline—*conflict prevention*—emerged in the 1990s, seeking to integrate the knowledge and efforts of those working for peace.

In 2001, Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for the development of new capacities within national governments, multilateral regional organizations, civil society, and the UN to undertake preventive actions in all stages of conflict. Such actions include: developing early warning systems and enhanced preventive diplomacy capacities, strengthening international law and good governance, reducing the proliferation of weapons and protecting human rights, supporting sustainable development² and the fair distribution of resources, reducing poverty, tackling public health crises, reducing ethnic tensions, and building strong institutions of global civil society.

Many in the international community are already making progress to develop and implement policies of peaceful prevention. The European Union, African Union, and other multilateral organizations are working to develop new mechanisms for regional conflict prevention. Sweden has created a national policy for the prevention of violent conflict, and the United Kingdom has created conflict prevention “pools” to bring together the knowledge and resources of different government entities. The UN Development Program, World Bank, and national development agencies are exploring methods of integrating conflict prevention into their program work in countries worldwide.

Civil society—community leaders, non-profit organizations (NGOs), women’s groups, journalists and businessmen—have demonstrated that their influence can sometimes extend beyond that of soldiers and diplomats. Political leaders across the world became

² The UN Development Program (UNDP) has a policy emphasis on conflict-sensitive development. www.undp.org.

increasingly aware of civil society's potential to anticipate and resolve tensions.

Confirming this, Secretary General Kofi Annan stated in a report on the prevention of armed conflict in 2001,

"I urge NGOs (non-governmental organizations) with an interest in conflict prevention to organize an international conference of local, national, and international NGOs on their role in conflict prevention and future interactions with the United Nations in this field."

In response, non-governmental agencies across the globe working in humanitarian assistance, development, and peace-building have formed the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC). GPPAC is holding meetings across the globe and a conference at the UN in 2005 to help strengthen the role of civil society in conflict prevention and to improve the interaction between civil society organizations and the UN in conflict prevention.

The Path Ahead: Challenges and Hopes

Prevention is gaining momentum, both within the UN and broader society, and the international community is in agreement that prevention is less costly and more desirable than responding at the eleventh hour. However, many challenges remain. It is often difficult to create and hold enthusiasm for something as inherently intangible and invisible as prevention. How does one prove that prevention has occurred in order to justify costs? The political will to implement prevention measures is often insufficient as politicians allocate money for short-term projects to please their constituencies. In addition, prevention is extraordinarily complex. Similarly, it is difficult to identify strategies that are universally applicable, making the topic unwieldy for policymakers. Further complicating the issue, there are sensitivities of some governments. Sensitivities include a concern that preventive actions impinge on their sovereignty, and will be just another way that powerful northern states can assert their influence over poorer countries. Difficult questions of balance exist, such as, as one diplomat put it, "when does suffering trump sovereignty?" These queries are entrenched and complex, yet as the issue gains momentum, many governments express a willingness to engage these issues.

Despite the many challenges, the movement from the paradigm of reaction to one of prevention is gaining support, and networks are being formed and strengthened. Peace cannot be imposed by force, nor can it be imposed by states. It must take root. And while final responsibility for preventing war and building peace may lie with states, it is now widely accepted that societies have a major role to play in the process—they may in fact have to lead.

Prepared by Eliza Kretzmann.

Contains text from the European Center for Conflict Prevention and the Friends Committee on National Legislation, reprinted with permission. Also contains text from Bridgest

QUNO's current work on the Prevention of Violent Conflict

Bridging Civil Society and the UN

QUNO has worked closely with the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, and is a founding member of the NGO-UN Conflict Prevention Working Group, which works to form a constructive link between the UN and civil society in the prevention of armed conflict.

Memberships

Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), spearheaded by the European Centre for Conflict Prevention, is a global network of local, regional, and international organizations with an interest in conflict prevention; www.conflict-prevention.net.

NGO/UN Conflict Prevention Working Group: forms as a part of GPPAC, to collaborate with the UN and governments in New York toward prevention efforts. QUNO is a founding member. The objective of this working group is to integrate the Global Partnership initiative into UN departments and programs, UN Missions of Member States, and the New York civil society policy environment in order to dialogue on issues of conflict prevention and to strengthen networking and collaboration between conflict prevention actors. The majority of QUNO's work on prevention is through this working group.

Quaker Prevention Network: This network links Friends (Quakers) from around the world who are concerned with finding ways to prevent wars and other violent conflicts; www.quaker.org/peace-network.

Events

General Assembly Meeting, 2003: At the invitation of Jan Kavan, president of the 57th General Assembly of the UN, QUNO and the NGO/UN Conflict Prevention Working group organized a meeting in which 88 member states gathered at the UN to discuss the opportunities and challenges of civil society's contribution to conflict prevention. (See photo, opposite page).

Discussion Seminars: Several sessions bring different civil society actors, the UN, and governments together to discuss collaboration for the prevention of armed conflict. The information gathered from meetings will provide input for a report on prevention to be delivered to the UN's General Assembly in 2004, and assist in planning for the 2005 conference on civil societies' role in the prevention of armed conflict.

2005 Conference at the United Nations: This conference will focus mechanisms and recommendations on the role of civil society in the prevention of armed conflict and in the



Groups working on Prevention of Violent Conflict Issues can join the Global Partnership network by contacting the regional coordinator in their area. www.conflict-prevention.net



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7. **Preventing War and Disaster.** Annual Report of the Secretary-General, New York: United Nations, 1999. <http://www.un.org/Docs/SG/Report99/toc.htm>
8. **An Agenda for Peace.** Report of the Secretary General, New York: United Nations, 1992. <http://www.un.org/Docs/SG/agpeace.html>

Further Reading

1. **Resolution 57/337. Prevention of Armed Conflict** (A/RES/57/337); available at <http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/r57.htm>
2. **Peaceful Prevention of Deadly Conflict.** Friends Committee on National Legislation, Washington, DC, 2003. Available online at http://www.fcnl.org/issues/int/sup/ppdc_booklet.htm.
3. **Prevention of Armed Conflict.** Report of the Secretary General, New York: United Nations, 2002.
4. **The Responsibility to Protect:** Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, Ottawa, Canada, 2001. Available online at <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/iciss-ciise/report-en.asp>
5. **Panel on UN Peace Operations, "Brahimi" Report:** http://www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations
6. **Preventing Violent Conflict.** Swedish Policy for the 21st Century: Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Stockholm, Sweden, 2001. This can be ordered online at <http://www.utrikes.regeringen.se/inenglish/pressinfo/information/form.htm>

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The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO), located in Geneva and New York, represents Quakers through Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC), an international non-governmental organization with consultative status at the United Nations (UN). QUNO Works to promote the peace and justice concerns of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) from around the