Disaster **Prevention**

Disaster prevention seeks to reduce the vulnerability of societies to the effects of disasters, and also to address their man-made causes. Early warning is especially important for short-term prevention. Advance warning of famine facilitates relief operations; advance warning of storms and floods helps people move out of harm's way in time. Improvements in wide-area satellite surveillance technologies are revolutionizing the collection of early warning data relevant to disaster prevention.

United Nations agencies are playing an increasingly important early warning role. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations provides vital warning on impending famines, while the World Meteorological Organization provides support for tropical cyclone forecasting and drought monitoring. The Internet is facilitating the real-time dissemination of satellite-derived and other warning data.

Greater efforts are also being made to improve contingency planning and other preparedness measures for disaster-prone countries, while major improvements in risk-assessment and loss-estimation methodologies have been identified through the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR). As a result of these and other innovations, national Governments are increasingly aware of the dangers and costs imposed by inappropriate land use and environmental practices.

There is also a growing consensus on what must be done. Stricter limits should be placed on residential and commercial development in hazardous areas—vulnerable flood plains, hillsides prone to slippage and earthquake fault zones. Construction codes should ensure more resilient buildings as well as infrastructure that can maintain essential services when disaster does strike. Such codes must, of course, be enforced. Sounder environmental practices are also needed, particularly with respect to deforestation of hillsides and the protection of wetlands. And because poverty rather than choice drives people to live in disaster-prone areas, to be truly effective, disaster prevention strategies should be integrated into overall development policies.

The experience of the IDNDR shows that a key to successful longer-term prevention strategies is broad-based cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation. The campaign to reduce carbon emissions and slow global warming illustrates what can be achieved with such cooperation Working closely together and guided by the expert consensus that evolved in the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the scientific community and national and local governments, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have been highly successful in alerting

the international community to the threats posed by global warming. Much remains to be done to transform this concern into effective action, however.

Here too we have ample evidence for the benefits of prevention. As severe as last year's floods in China were, the death toll would have been far higher without the extensive disaster-prevention efforts China has undertaken over the years. Floods on a similar scale in 1931 and 1954 claimed more than 140,000 and 33,000 lives, respectively—in contrast to 3,000 in 1998. Likewise, Hurricane Mitch claimed between 150 and 200 lives in one Honduran village, but none in an equally exposed village nearby, where a disaster-reduction pilot programme had been in operation for some time.

We should not underestimate the challenges, however. In some areas we still lack a broad scientific consensus on core issues and many questions remain unanswered. But the problem often lies not so much in achieving a consensus among scientists as in persuading Governments to resist pressures from vested interests opposed to change.

Resources are a pervasive concern. Some Governments, particularly in the poorest developing countries, simply lack the funds for major risk-reduction and disaster-prevention programmes. International assistance is critical here. And because preparedness and prevention programmes can radically reduce the future need for humanitarian aid and reconstruction costs, such assistance is highly cost-effective.

Education is essential—and not just in schools. Many national Governments and local communities have long pursued appropriate and successful indigenous risk-reduction and risk-mitigation strategies. Finding ways to share that knowledge, and to couple it with the expertise of the scientific community and the practical experience of NGOs, should be encouraged.

For all of these reasons, it is essential that the pioneering work carried out during the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction be continued. In July of this year, the IDNDR Forum set out a strategy for the new millennium, "A Safer World in the 21st Century: Risk and Disaster Reduction". It has my full support.

Preventing War

For the United Nations, there is no higher goal, no deeper commitment and no greater ambition than preventing armed conflict. The main short- and medium-term strategies for preventing non-violent conflicts from escalating into war, and preventing earlier wars from erupting again, are preventive diplomacy, preventive deployment and preventive disarmament. "Post-conflict peace-building" is a broad policy approach that embraces all of these, as well as other initiatives. Longer-term prevention strategies address the root causes of armed conflict

Whether it takes the form of mediation, conciliation or negotiation, preventive diplomacy is normally non-coercive, low-key and confidential in its approach. Its quiet achievements are mostly unheralded; indeed, it suffers from the irony that when it does succeed *nothing* happens. Sometimes the need for confidentiality means that success stories can never be told. As former United Nations Secretary-General U Thant once remarked, "The perfect good offices operation is one which is not heard of until it is successfully concluded or even never heard of at all." It is not surprising that preventive diplomacy is so often unappreciated by the public at large.

In some trouble spots, the mere presence of a skilled and trusted Special Representative of the Secretary-General can prevent the escalation of tensions; in others, more proactive engagement may be needed.

In September and October of last year, interventions by my Special Envoy to Afghanistan prevented escalating tensions between Iran and Afghanistan from erupting into war. This vital mission received little publicity, yet its cost was minimal and it succeeded in averting what could have been a massive loss of life.

Preventive diplomacy is not restricted to officials. Private individuals as well as national and international civil society organizations have played an increasingly active role in conflict prevention, management and resolution. So-called "citizen diplomacy" sometimes paves the way for subsequent official agreements. For example, former United States President Jimmy Carter's June 1994 visit to Pyongyang helped resolve a crisis over North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and set in motion a process that led directly to an agreement in October that year between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In the Middle East peace process, it was a small Norwegian research institute that played the critical initial role in paving the way for the 1993 Oslo Agreement.

In addressing volatile situations that could lead to violent confrontation, Governments are increasingly working in partnership with civil society organizations to defuse tensions and seek creative resolutions to what are often deep-seated problems. In Fiji,

for example, collaboration between NGOs and government officials, aided by the quiet diplomacy of some regional States, resulted in the promulgation of a new constitution and forestalled what many observers believed was a real possibility of violent conflict.

Early warning is also an essential component of preventive strategy and we have steadily improved our capacity to provide it, often in partnership with regional organizations, such as the Organization of African Unity. But the failures of the international community to intervene effectively in Rwanda and elsewhere were not due to a lack of warning. In the case of Rwanda, what was missing was the political willingness to use force in response to genocide. The key factors here were the reluctance of Member States to place their forces in harm's way in a conflict where no perceived vital interests were at stake, a concern over cost, and doubts—in the wake of Somalia—that intervention could succeed.

Complementing preventive diplomacy are preventive deployment and preventive disarmament. Like peacekeeping, preventive deployment is intended to provide a "thin blue line" to help contain conflicts by building confidence in areas of tension or between highly polarized communities. To date, the only specific instance of the

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former has been the United Nations mission to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Such deployments have been considered in other conflicts and remain an underutilized but potentially valuable preventive option.

Preventive disarmament seeks to reduce the number of small arms and light weapons in conflict-prone regions. In El Salvador, Mozambique and elsewhere, this has entailed demobilizing combat forces as well as collecting and destroying their weapons as part of the implementation of an overall peace agreement. Destroying yesterday's weapons prevents their being used in tomorrow's wars.

Preventive disarmament efforts are also increasingly directed towards slowing small arms and light weapons trafficking, the only weapons used in most of today's armed conflicts. These weapons do not cause wars, but they can dramatically increase both their lethality and their duration. I firmly support the various initiatives to curtail this lethal trade that are currently being pursued within the United Nations, at the regional level and by NGO coalitions.

What has come to be known as post-conflict peace-building is a major and relatively recent innovation in preventive strategy. During the 1990s, the United Nations developed a more holistic approach to implementing the comprehensive peace agreements it negotiated. From Namibia to Guatemala, post-conflict peace-building has involved inter-agency teams working alongside NGOs and local citizens' groups to help provide emergency relief, demobilize combatants, clear mines, run elections, build impartial police forces and set in motion longer-term development efforts. The premise of this broad strategy is that human security, good governance, equitable development and respect for human rights are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

Post-conflict peace-building is important not least because there are far more peace agreements to be implemented today than there were in the past. In fact, three times as many agreements have been signed in the 1990s as in the previous three decades. Some agreements have failed, often amid great publicity, but most have held.

Long-term prevention strategies, in addressing the root causes of conflict, seek to prevent destructive conflicts from arising in the first place. They embrace the same holistic approach to prevention that characterizes post-conflict peace-building. Their approach is reflected in the recent United Nations University study that found that inclusive government is the best guarantor

against internal violent conflicts. Inclusiveness requires that all the major groups in a society participate in its major institutions—government, administration, police and the military.

These conclusions are consistent with the so-called "democratic peace thesis", which states that democracies rarely go to war against each other, and that they have low levels of internal violence compared with non-democracies The former proposition is still subject to lively debate among academic experts—in part over the changing meanings of "democracy" across time and geography. But the latter proposition is less controversial: in essence, democracy *is* a non-violent form of internal conflict management

Long-term prevention embraces far too many strategies to be considered in detail in this essay. Here I will simply highlight three that are worthy of consideration, but have thus far received relatively little attention in the international community.

First, the international community should do more to encourage policies that enhance people-centred security in conflict-prone States. Equitable and sustainable development is a necessary condition for security, but minimum standards of security are also a precondition for development. Pursuing one in isolation from the other makes little sense. Security from organized violence is a priority concern of people everywhere, and ensuring democratic accountability and transparency in the security sector should receive greater support and encouragement from donor States and the international financial institutions. Moreover, since the overwhelming majority of today's armed conflicts take place within, not between, States, it makes good security sense in many cases to shift some of the resources that are allocated to expensive external defence programmes to relatively low-cost initiatives that enhance human--and hence national—security

Second, greater effort should be put into ensuring that development policies do not exacerbate the risks of conflict—by increasing inequality between social groups, for example. In this context, the idea of "conflict impact assessments" should be explored further. Such assessments seek, via consultation with a broad range of stakeholders, to ensure that particular development or governance policies at the very least do not undermine security and at best enhance it. The model here is the well-established environmental impact assessment process, which accompanies major development and extractive industry projects in many countries.

Third, the changing realities of the global economy mean new challenges—and new opportunities. During the past decade development assistance has continued to decline while private capital flows to the developing world have risen significantly.

This has reduced the relative influence of donor States and international institutions in developing countries, while increasing the presence of international corporations. The private sector and security are linked in many ways, most obviously because thriving markets and human security go hand in hand. But global corporations can do more than simply endorse the virtues of the market. Their active support for better governance policies can help create environments in which both markets and human security flourish.

As must now be evident, the common thread running through almost all conflict-prevention policies is the need to pursue what we in the United Nations refer to as good governance. In practice, good governance involves promoting the rule of law, tolerance of minority and opposition groups, transparent political processes, a commitment to eradicate corruption, an independent judiciary, an impartial police force, a military that is strictly subject to civilian control, a free press and vibrant civil society institutions, as well as meaningful elections. Above all, good governance means respect for human rights.

We should not delude ourselves, however, into thinking that prevention is a panacea, or that even the best-resourced prevention policies will guarantee peace. Preventive strategy is predicated on the assumption of good faith, the belief that Governments will seek to place the welfare of the people