The UK Conflict Prevention Initiative for Africa

Why does violent conflict in Africa matter?

Violent conflict remains one of the most important obstacles to reducing poverty, upholding human rights and achieving sustainable development in Africa. The spread of conflicts in Africa poses a threat to global security because it leads to large scale human displacement, environmental degradation and provides opportunities for international criminal and terrorist networks.

Entrenched and long running African conflicts such as those in Angola, Sudan and Somalia are now all but ignored. Meanwhile new wars have broken out. In the Great Lakes Region more than a dozen African nations have, in one way or another, been sucked into a series of interlocking conflicts since the mid 1990s.

While some progress has been made since 2000 in tackling the conflicts in Sierra Leone, DR Congo and Burundi, as well as the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, these countries and their surrounding regions remain vulnerable to renewed conflicts because many of the root causes remain. There are also real risks of new conflicts erupting elsewhere that would have significant regional ramifications.

What are the causes and drivers of Conflict in Africa?

Tackling violent conflict in Africa requires clear thinking, honest and agreed analysis of the fundamental causes of conflict and a commitment from Africans and non-Africans to work together to tackle those causes.

Africans urgently need to take 'ownership' of local solutions to violent conflict and address the indigenous causes of conflict. These include political, economic and social exclusion, poor governance and corruption, manipulation of ethnicity, and abuse of human rights. Africa also needs to address the weaknesses of its regional security structures and conflict prevention mechanisms.

For its part the international system, led by the UN and driven by the political and financial muscle of the G8, can help to facilitate these African processes. But it also needs to address the weaknesses in global governance that exacerbate the causes of conflict in Africa. These include the terms of economic exchange between Africa and the West; the weaknesses of international mechanisms for dealing with conflict in Africa; abusive exploitation of mineral/natural resources; and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The international system also needs to muster the will and resources to help find solutions to existing protracted conflicts such as those in Sudan and the DR Congo.

New approaches

New approaches to regional and international conflict management are required to deal with the changing nature of violent conflict in Africa. 'Classic' peacekeeping doctrine and conflict diplomacy have been shown to be ineffective tools in dealing with the 'asymmetric' and increasingly regional conflicts which have emerged around collapsed and failed states where distinctions between state

and non-state actors have become blurred.

In many African societies, countries and regions violent conflict has become the 'normal' state of affairs. Control of economic resources has become an important factor in motivating and sustaining armed conflicts. Complex political economies, which often hide behind the outward symbols of statehood and national sovereignty, have grown up around conflict. The challenge therefore is to transform regional and national political economies that are served by violent conflict into healthy systems based on political participation, social and economic inclusion, and respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Conflict Prevention

The UN has done much to lead a new approach to achieving peace and security in Africa. In his July 2001 report on the prevention of armed conflict, the UN Secretary General called for a greater focus on early action to prevent violent conflicts before they break out. This is to be supported and should provide the conceptual framework for any workable action plan which aims to tackle the problem of armed conflict in Africa.

A holistic, long-term and coherent approach would tackle the root causes and structural crises that underlie violent conflict in Africa. Such an approach would prevent political crises from descending into violence and help to resolve existing violent conflicts in such a way that violence does not recur.

What is the UK doing?

The UK Government has a strong interest in reducing conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. The establishment in 2001 of a government-wide joint conflict prevention initiative provides the UK with an opportunity to maximise the impact of the extensive conflict prevention work already being undertaken by the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence. The mechanism is an important step in developing a sustained commitment to addressing African conflicts based on a shared strategy and common objectives. The conflict prevention initiative also enables the UK to react more rapidly to emerging crises and to opportunities for peace building. The UK's conflict prevention strategy is based on our experience in mediation and our engagement in peacekeeping and peacekeeping training and security sector reform programmes. The UK's response and actions draw on our role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, our membership of the EU, our political and developmental representation within Africa and our role within the International Financial Institutions and UN humanitarian and development system.

The UK is seeking to ensure that its own policies and programmes for tackling and preventing violent conflict in Africa are coherent with the policies and programmes of other countries and institutions, especially the EU and the World Bank, in order to maximise their potential. The UK is also actively seeking effective partnership with African nations. The UK expects to pursue this partnership vigorously on a bilateral basis and through the G8's response to New Partnership for Africa's Development and the UN Economic Commission for Africa's proposed Global Compact.

The UK Government expects its new arrangements for conflict prevention in Africa will provide the basis for a comprehensive plan of action linking immediate needs to longer-term strategy.

The most pressing needs are for actions that will contain the spread of regional

conflict in and around Sierra Leone, in the Great Lakes region, and in Sudan and Angola. UK conflict prevention work in Africa will focus on the following areas:

Small arms and light weapons controls – The UK is increasing its support for the control of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Africa. It is improving domestic and European measures to better regulate the arms trade including the transport and shipment of weapons. It supports greater efforts to control the international trade. The UK assists national and regional arms control and destruction programmes in Africa.

Inclusive development – The UK continues to encourage responsible investment and development practices in areas of conflict and encourage responsible international investment. The UK continues to work with the International Financial Institutions to encourage more stable and diverse economic activity.

Reduction in the exploitation of mineral and other natural resources for the purposes of war – The UK is working with others to examine and assist ways of limiting the exploitation of such resources for the purpose of conflict. We are also seeking to identify and promote the means by which such resources are safeguarded and managed in a way that reduces conflict and ensures that they benefit the population.

Inclusive government – The UK is working with others to support development efforts that reduce individual and group inequality. We seek to promote commitments to develop services that are inclusive and responsive to all groups and sectors. The UK is also working to support and help develop strategies for reconciliation, reintegration and justice in conflict affected countries.

Security Sector reform – The UK continues to identify countries where British involvement in security sector reform and increased effectiveness and accountability of the security forces to democratic authority will enhance peace and security and help reduce conflict.

Regional security bodies – The UK supports actions and international coordination that will lead to enhanced common and mutual security in Africa.

African peacekeeping capacity – The UK is working with the United Nations, the US, and within the EU to develop an agreed programme of action to support and enhance Africa's peacekeeping capacity in line with the approaches suggested in the Brahimi report.

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