

Guest Editorial

The Costs of Conflict to the EU

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The oft-repeated mantra that ‘prevention is better than cure’ permeates the attitude of modern society towards a whole host of potential dangers. From healthy eating to car maintenance; from fire regulations to medical vaccines, we have developed a number of measures specifically designed to reduce the risks of disease or damage. When it relates to conflicts, however, this same culture of prevention has yet to become widely accepted, either by individual states or by the European Union as a whole. Not only are countless lives lost through the lack of any early, decisive action but whole countries are brought to their knees by the violence and destruction which is allowed to continue unchecked. For the international community and particularly the EU, which was founded precisely on the principle of preventing the outbreak of war in Europe, this failure to intervene effectively and decisively makes a mockery of its own self-proclaimed ideals and values.

Yet as the international community lurches from one crisis to another, there is little evidence that lessons are being learned. From the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia to the killing fields of Rwanda and on to the current crisis in Algeria, the pattern of EU involvement rarely seems to change. No matter how clear the danger, no matter how great the destruction or terrible the atrocities, mobilizing international action continues to be a slow and sometimes arbitrary process seemingly based more on vested interests and public outrage than genuine humanitarian concerns.

Although, of course, the principal victims of such conflicts are those forced to live and sometimes die surrounded by violence and fear, the EU, along with the rest of the international community, also pays a price, both moral and financial, for its failure to prevent or limit the conflict. Moral in the sense that Western European states have committed themselves to a value-based foreign policy and any violent conflict, however distant, is an affront to those values, and financial in terms of

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the huge costs borne by the EU in attempting a resolution to the crisis and supporting the reconstruction of often devastated countries.

Within the EU, it is clear that the rule of unanimity is effectively paralysing the organization's decision-making processes. In addition, the development of coherent and coordinated policy options is further hampered by the lack of an administrative unit engaged in data collection, early warning and policy analysis. Without such a body it is difficult for the Council of Ministers, the primary decision-making body within the EU, to devise and implement a clear and continuous policy in foreign affairs. However, this should not be seen as an excuse, especially in the light of the Maastricht Treaty's commitment to a common foreign and security policy. Unfortunately, once again, fine words have not resulted in real action.

But if governments are to be persuaded of the need for early action, it is most likely to come from a heightened awareness and appreciation of the huge costs resulting from EU involvement in conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction. Those responsible for foreign policy formulation might be more inclined to take concerted preventative action if they were fully aware that such measures could be justified on the basis of a cost-benefit assessment. In short, if early intervention saves lives, credibility and money, then the case for conflict prevention becomes strong.

The contention of this editorial, based on research conducted by International Alert¹ and Saferworld, is that the unacceptable costs of internal conflicts – humanitarian, political and financial – demand a radical rethink of the EU's approach towards conflict prevention. It is to be hoped that by drawing attention to some of the costs incurred by the EU through involvement in three recent conflicts – the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the genocide in Rwanda and the unrest in the Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) – the article will encourage a move towards the development of a more coherent conflict prevention strategy.

I Bosnia

In 1995 the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement finally brought to an end over four years of war in the former Yugoslavia. For much of that time, the small, newly independent state of Bosnia-Herzegovina

¹ International Alert is an international NGO working to contribute to the prevention and resolution of violent internal conflicts. For more information on this research see, *The Costs of Conflict*, (International Alert/Saferworld 1998).

witnessed the worst of the fighting and bore the brunt of the casualties. By the end of the conflict, the pre-war population of 4.4 million had been reduced to fewer than 3 million.

- During the conflict, 145,000 were killed and 174,000 injured.
- 2.5 million people were uprooted from their homes and over a million fled abroad, half to EU Member States.
- The UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was the largest UN peace-keeping operation since the Congo, costing more than \$1 billion between 1993 and 1995.
- 28,000 European (excluding Russian) troops participated in the successor IFOR operation, which cost \$5 billion.
- Between 1992 and 1996, the European Community Humanitarian Office disbursed over \$1.3 billion ECUs (\$1.4 billion) to support the emergency needs of the Bosnian population.
- The World Bank has set aside \$3 billion for Bosnian reconstruction, with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the EU funding additional projects costing \$282 million and \$78 million respectively.

Although the origins of the war lie buried in the complex historical relationships between the disparate peoples of the former Yugoslavia, there is little doubt that decisive action on the part of the international community in the early months of the war might have prevented much of the killing and devastation inflicted on the country and avoided many of the financial and political costs subsequently incurred by the EU and others. The primary failures were a lack of political will and an absence of effective institutional and procedural tools. A show of force at an early stage would have demonstrated the international community's clear commitment to ending the war as quickly as possible and might have deterred the Bosnian Serbs from adopting such an overtly aggressive stance. Such early intervention might also have spared the EU the loss of credibility it suffered as a result of being unable to resolve a conflict fought on its very doorstep and avoided the very public and very damaging squabbles over policy between the EU and the US. As it was, no action was taken and the war dragged on seemingly endlessly with the result that many more lives were lost and billions of dollars were spent in humanitarian assistance and peace-keeping contributions. Indeed, the full financial costs of the conflict are unlikely to be known for many years to come. Not only did the war devastate the blossoming economic relationship between the countries of the former Yugoslavia and the EU but also set the region's development back by decades. In addition, the huge task of rebuilding

the country's physical infrastructure and political structures has only just begun.

II Rwanda

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Rwandan genocide was that it could have been avoided. As General Dallaire, Commander of UNAMIR, commented at the time, with 5,000 troops and a clear mandate much of the killing could have been prevented. His words are likely to haunt EU and UN policy makers for years to come. Ultimately, however, the international response was characterized by indecision and prevarication. As the slaughter continued, the UN was seemingly more concerned with the real definition of the word 'genocide' than with taking action to prevent the killing.

- An estimated 800,000 men, women and children were killed within three months in the Rwanda genocide.
- Over 2 million Rwandese were forced to flee their homes.
- At its peak strength, the UNAMIR peacekeeping operation in Rwanda cost \$200 million a year.
- The French-led military intervention, Operation Turquoise, cost approximately \$212 million during the three months that it was active.
- UN agencies spent \$1.35 billion during the year at which the crisis was at its peak.
- ECHO spent over 560 million ECUs (\$600 million) in supporting the humanitarian response to the Great Lakes region.
- The Rwandese genocide destabilized the entire central African region.
- In 1995, the international community committed \$875.5 million towards rehabilitation of Rwanda's physical infrastructure, transport and small industry.

The refugee crisis provoked by the genocide has resulted in enormous costs for the international community, including the EU. Since 1994, the EC Humanitarian Office (ECHO) has disbursed more than ECU 500 million in assistance to the Great Lakes region, much of it emergency aid for the refugee camps set up in eastern Zaire and Burundi. In addition, the EU has spent millions in contributions to the peacekeeping effort and is continuing to help finance the massive task of physical and political reconstruction. Once again, this is likely to require substantial financial assistance from the international community for many years to come. However, Rwanda and the wider region

remains in a precarious situation. Continued attention to the region is required, along with a sustained commitment of time, money and effort to prevent such a tragedy from repeating itself.

III Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan)

Along with the Balkans, the Caucasus constitutes the most unstable and conflict-prone region in Europe. This instability is an accurate reflection of its highly complex ethnic make-up. In recent years, it has experienced three significant armed conflicts related to ethnicity: the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijan. Together these conflicts have resulted in hundreds of thousands of people being killed or injured and over a million refugees. Despite the obvious potential for conflict in the region, the EU's response to the escalating tensions has been overwhelmingly reactive rather than preventative. It was not until late 1992 that significant attempts at mediation were undertaken by which time the violence had become more widespread and the prospects for peace had correspondingly diminished.

- 15,000 people lost their lives as a result of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh.
- Over a quarter of a million have been killed or seriously injured in the violence and political turmoil that followed Georgian independence.
- In coping with the consequences of conflict, ECHO spent over ECU 160 million between 1994 and 1996.
- By 1994, Azerbaijan's GDP was only 37 per cent of its 1988 level; Armenia's plummeted by 60 per cent from 1991 to 1993.
- Conflict and political instability in the region has inhibited the exploitation of natural resources in the Caspian Sea region.

Once more, the EU was left to pick up the pieces. In attempting the near impossible task of mitigating the effects of the conflicts, the EU has incurred a substantial financial burden, with contributions to humanitarian and technical aid already running into several hundred million ECUs. The continuing instability of the region and the intractable nature of the conflicts will probably ensure the EU's financial involvement in the region for the foreseeable future. The Caucasian conflicts have also presented a complicating factor in the vital EU-Russian relationship. Some commentators allege that Moscow has used instability in the region to cement its hegemony over

its 'near-abroad'. This is something of fundamental concern to the Union, which should do its utmost to prevent renewed divisions in Europe.

IV Conclusion

The aim of the data outlined in this editorial is to draw attention to a range of costs, humanitarian, political and financial, incurred by the EU through its involvement in three recent conflicts. Apart from the sheer scale of these costs, the most surprising and shocking thing to emerge from an examination of the conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda and the Caucasus is the extent to which determined, coordinated action at an early stage might have helped to prevent or at least mitigate the terrible suffering endured by the victims of these wars. The fact that such a strategy might also have saved the EU a great deal of money and credibility makes it even more difficult to understand why more is not being done to develop a coherent conflict prevention strategy.

Conflicts do not materialize out of nothing. In most cases, early warning signs are present. However, there would appear to be a lack of capacity and a lack of willingness to translate early warning into early action. Broadly speaking, what is needed is an improvement in the political, economic and military components of the Union and a convergence of their activities on the objective of conflict prevention. For this to happen, some institutional reform will be necessary and a greater willingness shown to coordinate the work of individual states as well as improved cooperation in setting priorities and formulating policy.

There are, therefore, four essential areas where the EU needs to improve its conflict prevention capacities:

- *Early warning*: the EU needs to improve the collation and presentation of material and to enhance coordination between information gatherers, policy analysts and decision makers.
- *Policy planning*: the EU needs to improve the development of policy briefs and the presentation of policy options to aid the decision-making process.
- *Implementation*: the EU needs to utilize all available instruments (diplomatic, economic, military and others) and coordinate activities with other actors.
- *Evaluation*: the EU should undertake continuous monitoring and assessment of action to refine and update policy in the light of developments.

If the EU is genuine about its desire to assert Europe's influence in the world, as it professes to be, then it must learn from its recent failures and construct new policies for dealing with conflicts in the future. The aim of this editorial is to show that the development of an effective conflict prevention strategy is at once a humanitarian, political and financial imperative.