

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum,
Early Warning Signs and Conflict Prevention: Reflecting on Zimbabwe
November 13, 2007

This month's Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum (CPRF), focused on the importance of Early Warning signs for conflict Situation. In conflict as in health, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure - and discerning the early warning signs of a conflict is critical for preventing it from ripening into violence and devastation. Yet, all too often, conflicts ripen into violence despite the identification of early warning signs - as now seems likely in Zimbabwe. With a focus on the situation in Zimbabwe, the distinguished panel at this month's CPRF discussed the role and importance of early warning signs in preventing and ameliorating conflict. They considered such questions as: Why is it important to understand early warning signs? What are the limits of such knowledge? How can the field best make use of this knowledge to foster change and prevent conflict? The panelists included: Ozong Agborsangaya-Fiteu, Senior Program Manager for Africa, Freedom House; Krista Hendry, Senior Associate, Fund for Peace; and, Mark Schneider, Senior Vice President, Special Adviser on Latin America, International Crisis Group. Charles F. Dambach from the Alliance for Peacebuilding facilitated the discussion.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Dambach introduced the topic and the speakers. He pointed to many challenges still ahead in regard to early warning, but he also underlined the important work accomplished thus far by the organizations represented by the speakers.

Mark Schneider started his presentation by placing the concept of "early warning" in the current geopolitical situation. To illustrate his point, Mr. Schneider presented statistics regarding the number of wars, number of conflict related deaths since 1991, and current statistics on genocide. Speaking about political stability as the task of the international community, Mr. Schneider mentioned that violence has been declining between 1964 and 2006. At present, the level of violence is at its lowest point, he said. As a major concern for this decade he mentioned that attention must be paid to early signs and early response. Mr. Schneider briefly spoke about the definition of war as war on terrorism, pointing out that many other wars still exist, as well as "indirect" loss of lives and violence in its many forms. He continued by asking a question about the actions of the international community in this regard. Replying to this question, he spoke about "early warning" in the framework of the International Crisis Group's (ICG) activities.

As Mr. Schneider explained, "early warning" consists of the analysis of what is happening "on the ground", followed by recommendations as to what to do about it. For the past 10 years, ICG has done country-to-country analysis and has published over 500 reports. Mr. Schneider pointed to two types of reports and analyses: qualitative and quantitative. According to him, ICG has been doing qualitative analysis. This meant taking into account the quantitative Failed States Index (FSI) developed by the Fund For Peace, while at the same time doing qualitative assessment in each country. Mr. Schneider mentioned that the organization also tried to take the methodology global in its effort to create an appropriate climate for the "responsibility to protect" at the international level. Such efforts, he said, resulted in the adoption of the concept at the "Millennium + 5" summit. In Mr. Schneider's words, this signifies a beginning in the development of an understanding that there is a need for the international community to undertake actions. However, he underlined the fact that one is still far from the

stage at which the international community will act out, since a unified early warning system still does not exist.

The responsibility to prevent conflicts, Mr. Schneider said, includes early warning and the responsibility to act; the third element is the political will. Work on building and organizing the political will implies harnessing forces of persuasion, collecting data and developing a climate in which citizens will “force” policy makers to put together a system of early response. For instance, ICG is currently working on building the necessary political will in the context of Pakistan in order to help the country not become a failed state and one vulnerable to terrorism. In regard to Zimbabwe, the situation is extremely fragile but at the same time there are elements one needs to build on, Mr. Schneider said.

In her introducing remarks, Ozong Agborsangaya-Fiteu spoke briefly about Freedom House’s (FH) work in reference to Zimbabwe, which includes continuous analysis of the country since 1976. She mentioned two tendencies in the approach to Zimbabwe: it is regarded either as a post-conflict or as a conflict country. This may seem strange when one looks at the country’s history – the fact that there has been no armed conflict since 1979, Ms. Agborsangaya-Fiteu said. However, as she later explained, the reason for classifying Zimbabwe as a (post) conflict country lies in the complexity of the situation. Although there has been no eruption of armed conflict since 1979, Zimbabwe has been characterized by some features of a conflict country. The type of conflict implied here is political conflict, Ms. Agborsangaya-Fiteu said, in which various actors are involved. These include youth militias who perpetrate violence, as well as government forces, police, military and other groups involved in abusing and oppressing civilians. In Ms. Agborsangaya-Fiteu’s words, political conflict can also be linked to elections, since the last two elections – in 2002 and 2005 – have been disputed and marked by intensified violence. She pointed to the complex role of the military, mentioning that some analysts liken Zimbabwe to a military state. According to her, there is not enough information to confirm that claim; however one can mention that heads of many offices such as ministries in Zimbabwe are former members of military.

As another important element in the context of Zimbabwe, Ms. Agborsangaya-Fiteu mentioned the “land issue” and the fact that the land reform did not take the desired course, but was marked by corruption, perpetration of injustices, as well as allocation of land to untrained farmers. This led to a massive drop in agricultural production, which in turn contributed to the overall economic failure. Another element of the difficult economic situation is the pullout of foreign investors, as well as the high inflation rate. Ms. Agborsangaya-Fiteu mentioned the very high unemployment rate – according to some 75-80%, and large numbers of IDPs as symptoms and results of economic failure, and extremely relevant problems in today’s Zimbabwe. She also mentioned that, even though Zimbabwe is not “an armed society like Chad”, tensions between the majority and the minority exist and they resulted in a massacre in 1984. As an additional problem resulting from the economic collapse, Ms. Agborsangaya-Fiteu pointed the rise in the levels of crime. She added that there is talk about a possibility of an armed coup in Zimbabwe, as well as talk about what will happen after Mugabe’s death, one of the assumptions being the increase of violence.

Closing her presentation, Ms. Agborsangaya-Fiteu spoke about possibilities for conflict transformation, singling out three important elements: the relation between impunity and justice needs to be addressed; the issue of land needs to be looked at in a more comprehensive way; and, there has to be a bona fide reconciliation process, since no such legacy exists apart from the one enforced.

Krista Hendry introduced the Failed States Index (FSI) developed by her organization, Fund for Peace, and, in the context of the two types of analysis previously mentioned by Mr. Schneider, spoke about five different models: 1) expert opinion, 2) statistical data, 3) content analysis, 4) local knowledge and 5) polling and surveys. She mentioned the difficulty of carrying out analysis for 100 countries as the reason for using quantitative data. Ms. Hendry pointed out that the quantitative data is sometimes old or missing, as is the case with Zimbabwe, but she nevertheless highlighted the importance of “having a number in order to try and identify the key conflict drivers”. In this context a set of elements is needed, including the appropriate software for analysis, the general idea being to use these tools to inform experts. Ms. Hendry spoke about various amounts of pressure to which all states are exposed, but to which they are sensitive to various degrees. FSI looks at pressures on states without offering a comparison, she said, pointing out that in order to understand what could be done, one needs to go “one level higher” and use experts’ opinions as well as local knowledge. Ms. Hendry mentioned the limited access to local knowledge in some situations, and how local media can sometimes be used as guidance. In this context, she highlighted the utility of a comparison between local and international media, explaining that “a self-imposed” censorship can sometimes be an important signal. In this regard, the lack of data in relation to Zimbabwe and other countries is also significant and informative. What needs to be done in situations like this, she said, is go back in time and look at when statistics were available, trying to figure out why at some point they no longer were.

In her final remarks Ms. Hendry said that coordination with local as well as international actors is important, pointing out that integrating local civil society means among other that the responsibility to react is the responsibility to support those who want to react.

The presentations were followed by a very lively discussion in which various issues have been brought up, including the role of the Organization of the African Union (OAU) and ECOWAS in Africa, elections and conflict in some other African countries. As a reaction to Ms. Agborsangaya-Fiteu’s presentation came a remark from the audience about how the elections in Zimbabwe in 2002 and 2005 had not been disputed but rather endorsed by the OAU, and how there had been no outbreaks of violence since there had been no casualties. Ms. Agborsangaya-Fiteu and Mr. Schneider explained that violence is not to be measured solely by the number of casualties.

In his closing remarks, Mr. Dambach underlined the fact that early warning signs are a relatively new development and that ICG has been doing its important work for only ten years. Considering the recent nature of the concept, he said, important progress has been made already since the UN has been significantly increasing its capacity to prevent conflicts due to, among other tools, the work of the ICG and the relevance and utility of the FSI.