

REBUILDING SOCIETIES EMERGING FROM CONFLICT

(Longer Version)

Demobilizing The War Machines: Making Peace Last

Introduction

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor to be here today, at this important and well-attended conference on "Rebuilding Societies Emerging from Conflict: A Shared Responsibility." This session is the last of five panel discussions scheduled to address different aspects of the topic. This afternoon a distinguished panel of experts will look at "Demobilizing the War Machines: making Peace Last."

Allow me to start off with a personal note. About five years ago during my coverage of the post-conflict demobilization in Tajikistan, a farmer-turned-combatant in the Hissar Valley, near the capital Dushanbe, stated that "the peaceful villagers turned violent overnight, the war lasted for five years, and restoration of peace will take much much longer." The Tajik example pales in comparison to the post-conflict situation in Afghanistan where as many as three quarter of a million ex-combatants are believed to be roaming the war-devastated country. Demobilization in Afghanistan is going to be a much greater challenge and a far lengthier process.

Consolidation of peace in societies emerging from conflict is a complex process undertaken in a highly volatile and extremely difficult environment. Whether the end of conflict is achieved through a multi-lateral peace accord, international intervention or the defeat of one of the fighting parties, the reconciliation and restoration of normalcy is often slow and faced with enormous challenges. The key to stabilization is curbing the ability and desire of former combatants to renew the violence and creating a national capacity to transform the war-instigated structures into peace building institutions. This involves a process of replacing the war machines with a credible legal and political system, re-establishing public confidence in state institutions, and shifting from a culture of violent opposition to a peaceful competition for power and influence. It is a multi-faceted procedure of "breaking" and "making."

Breaking the war machines in the post-conflict period is a prerequisite for sustaining peace. However failure to build attractive alternatives to the life of a warrior can lead to renewal of fighting as well as proliferation of criminal activity and banditry. Demobilizing the war machines encompasses a wide range of inter-linked tasks including disbanding the factional armies, creating an all-inclusive political and security system, promoting popular support for disarmament and reintegrating the former combatants into civil society.

Obviously, the process cannot be implemented in a vacuum. Although the international community has learnt greatly from a number of post-conflict experiences around the world, each case has its own peculiarities and distinction. The strategy for demobilization is shaped by diverse political, social and economic conditions under which the civil strife developed. These include the number and size of the warring factions, the depth of

political and ethnic division, the level of commitment of the combatants to the factional cause, the length of the conflict and the level of foreign involvement in the war. The gunmen who join the warring factions for survival or gain act differently from those who fight for an ideological or political cause. Further, the depth and scope of war-inspired social transformation dictates the nature and extent of the measures needed to achieve short-term and long-term goals.

A major initial step in post-conflict demobilization is disarming the ex-combatants. Effective demobilization is possible only through voluntary disarmament. The ways to achieve this are closely linked to the prevailing situation. It is often easier to collect weapons in less complex situations where a micro-disarmament can be achieved through gun-buy-back schemes, participation of ex-combatants in food for work projects and long-term employment programs.

The more complex situations are different. They are characterized by the multiplicity of players (Afghanistan, Liberia, Former Yugoslavia), longer duration of conflict (Cambodia, Nicaragua, Angola, El Salvador) and deeper political motivation for strife (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan). The existence of too many guns in unauthorized hands and the prevalence of unruly elements that benefited from the war can easily undermine disarmament. In such cases the optimum method needs to be a macro-disarmament approach rather than a micro-disarmament scheme. The macro-disarmament involves the creation of an internationally-backed political and security environment that can remove the inter-factional distrust and paves the way for voluntary disarmament as a broad-based commitment to peace. The strategy should eliminate the desire to use weapons rather than merely collect weapons.

The diverse, different instances of demobilization, ranging from Nicaragua and Salvador to Angola, Liberia, Cambodia and Afghanistan, share a number of commonalities that help devise general guidelines for dealing with emerging challenges facing the demobilization process.

Demobilization is a multifaceted process. No aspect of the post-conflict condition stands alone. Measures dealing with individual aspects of the situation cannot be effective unless they complement each other. The approach must be holistic. Complete disarmament is impossible without commitment of all parties to demobilize the war machine. This calls for the creation of a legitimate, broad-based, post-conflict political system that can be trusted by all parties. And finally long-term stability is hard to achieve without reintegrating former combatants, while rebuilding the national economic capability and civil society.

Many obstacles can impede disarmament and the demobilization of the war machines. When the warring factions see their interests or security threatened by the post-conflict efforts, they may resist disarmament and demobilization. This is particularly likely in places where distinctive patronage cultures have evolved during the war under the leadership of regional commanders. Further, during drawn-out conflicts criminal elements that are incorporated into the war machines often wield significant political clout and may control large businesses and are less inclined to give up power in the interest of peace. Reluctance to disarm grows when the post-conflict government is politically fragile and militarily weak. Political fragility can be overcome by broadening

the government base to include all parties. The government's political clout and coercive capacity has to be enhanced through integrating or rebuilding the national military establishment to ensure a balanced representation of diverse ethnic, regional and political factions.

However, until the government acquires the capability to fight spoilers and ambitious warlords, international and regional security support is essential. International peace keeping forces play the dual role of deterring and combating violence and providing security for humanitarian relief operations, return of refugees and opening roads for free movement of the population. These measures foster the growth of economic activity, trade and reconciliation.

Although the warring parties are primarily responsible for planning and execution of demobilization programs, the process cannot succeed without serious involvement of the international community. The complexity of post-conflict situations, the enormity of the tasks and challenges and the great need for resources make international and regional participation a crucial element. Extensive demilitarization and demobilization in El Salvador and Nicaragua were largely due to serious involvement of regional and international actors whose efforts complemented each other. This underscores the importance of coordinating multi-lateral demobilization schemes. Community, national and international coordinating bodies organize contributions and efforts of NGOs, regional and multilateral organizations and foreign donors.

The media plays a crucial role in demobilization. The press informs the society and influences opinions and perceptions that could shape attitudes and behavior either towards violence or in support of peace and harmony. The domestic media in the immediate aftermath of war, is either dysfunctional or polarized and biased. The fragmented information system often mixes facts with disinformation and propaganda. Neighboring countries that have a stake in the situation fail to fare better.

One of the controversial issues facing the press is the conflicting need for objective reporting and security in a fragile peace environment. In some cases reporting on human rights abuses by peace partners can be interpreted as a provocative move with serious consequences. In other cases, the media's own professional vulnerability might hamper objective reporting. Video, and sometimes audio, coverage tends to craft the story around available images and sounds of dramatic and violent events that can overshadow the real picture.

Radio has a wide-reaching impact. The airwaves are glutted with confusing information and interpretations by interest groups and anti-peace elements. In some cases the radio plays a significantly destructive role not only reflecting the deep ethnic division but also actively promoting it. Although most people turn to credible international broadcasts for objective and balanced information, local radios can target certain groups leading to violence and hindering disarmament.

The experience of Studio Ijambo, a radio program dedicated to peace building in Burundi, is of particular interest. Established in 1995 in the Bujumbura, it was a direct response to the hate propaganda that filled the airwaves in the Great Lakes region of Africa. Studio Ijambo's programs have had positive effect in inter-group relations, social

and political mobilization and political elite negotiations. It also helped restore public institutions and processes that contribute to peace and harmony.

There is an urgent need to foster the emergence of free and responsible media in the post-conflict period. Such a media should offer an objective, balanced and comprehensive picture of the situation to enable the people to make informed decisions. Further, by fostering dialogue among the people, giving voice to concerns of different segments of the population and debating the controversial issues, a responsible media can mobilize social forces for peace building.

Demobilization is a lengthy and gradual process with short-term and long-term impact. Failure to fit immediate priorities to long-term objectives can lead to renewal of conflict. Security is naturally the main concern during the initial phase of the post-conflict period. Whether security is provided by international peacekeepers or a national army, the approach used to achieve it can have a lasting impact. The need for security must be balanced with the popular demand for justice. Buying off ex-combatants through disarmament programs or offering them attractive demobilization incentives might have high political costs in the long run.

While there is a demand for short-term results, the situation is often too complex to be resolved solely by quick-impact efforts. Tactical solutions usually focus on the symptoms of the problem rather than the roots of the conflict. A long-term solution requires changes to the divisive situation rather than merely accommodating the armed factions. Long-term accommodation of different ethnic groups has to be addressed through the development of civil society and a private sector that meets group interests.