



## **The UN Peace-building Commission: background and a look ahead** **10 July 2007**

### **Lord Hannay of Chiswick, Chair, UNA-UK**

The UN Peace-building Commission came into being just over a year ago as a result of a decision taken at the UN Reform Summit in New York in September 2005 and following lengthy and complex negotiations in the General Assembly over its mandate and membership. It is good therefore that this conference should take a first look at the Commission's activities and try to assess its early performance and prospects. I have been asked to sketch in some of the background to its establishment; and I will also take a brief look at the way ahead. Others at this session will look at the case studies on the first two countries to be handled by the Commission.

The principal business of the Peace-building Commission is remedying the failure of states. Of course states did fail during the Cold War period, but remedying these failures was not seen to be part of the remit of the United Nations. All too often the task was assumed unilaterally and in a rough and ready – and often brutal – manner by one of the two superpowers or by a regional hegemon or by a neighbouring country. Cases in point are India's involvement in the creation of Bangladesh, the overthrow of Idi Amin of Uganda by Tanzania or of Pol Pot in Cambodia. But, following the end of the Cold War, the phenomenon of state failure multiplied, and the responsibility for picking up the pieces was increasingly thrust on the UN. Moreover the far-reaching and highly damaging knock-on effects of state failure became more evident. Failed states harboured terrorists – in Afghanistan, created the conditions for genocide – in Rwanda and Bosnia, unleashed regional mayhem – in the Great Lakes region of Africa and in West Africa, and precipitated massive flows of refugees in Northern Iraq and in Haiti. As if that was not enough, the early experiences of the UN in post-conflict peace-building were feeble, inadequate and insufficiently sustained, so that countries tended to slip back again into failure – Angola, Haiti, Sierra Leone and Liberia were examples of this kind of development.

That was the depressing, and often shameful, record which confronted UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and his High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, when the UN reform campaign began in 2003. There was never any doubt at all that one of the primary tasks of any reform proposal was to find a systematic way of addressing the problems of state failure in place of the hand-to-mouth remedies of recent years. In the view of the Panel, the international community needed to address both the issue of prevention, of preventing states from sliding into failure in the first place, and the issue of post-conflict peace-building. In institutional terms, it soon became clear that there was a major gap in the UN armoury when it came to finding effective and sustained responses to these problems. The Security Council was too busy with immediate crises; the international community's efforts were dispersed across a whole range of multilateral organizations and were often incoherent, uncoordinated, and sometimes even contradictory.

After looking carefully at one much-discussed possibility, the revival and re-shaping of the Trusteeship Council, the UN body set up in 1945 to handle the transition of the UN's trusteeship territories from colonial status to independence, the Panel and the Secretary-General concluded that this would not work. The Trusteeship Council was dominated by the five Permanent Members; everything about its nomenclature conveyed a stigma which would be bitterly resented by those countries to which its procedures were to be applied; and making it fit for the purposes of the twenty-first century would have necessitated far-reaching amendments to the Charter itself, which was likely to prove a lengthy, laborious and contentious process. So we opted instead for a much more rapid approach, and at the same time, one designed specifically for the circumstances of the present – the setting up of an entirely new institution, the Peace-building Commission, with the parallel establishment within the Secretariat of a Peace-building Support Office with adequate

funding to support its activities. At the outset, the Panel envisaged the Commission dealing both with cases of prevention and with cases of post-conflict peace-building, but following a fire-storm of protest from the developing countries, the first part of the mandate was suppressed. I believe myself that was a pity and a mistake.

What was finally endorsed by the September 2005 Summit and enacted by the General Assembly was to bring together in one body representatives of the Security Council and of the Economic and Social Council, of the main troop contributors and donors, of regional organisations and banks, and of the International Financial Institutions, and seek to establish a coherent and sustained response to the complex and prolonged challenges of post-conflict peace-building. And that is what is now being put to the test, as the Peace-building Commission begins its work.

Now a few thoughts on the way ahead. The first is that the Peace-building Commission does need rapidly to get to grips with a much wider range of cases than the two – Burundi and Sierra Leone – with which it is currently involved. After all, the UN is now dealing with some seventeen or more peace operations. While not all those are suitable for handling by the Peace-Building Commission, a fair proportion are.

The second point is that achieving greater coherence and sustainability in post-conflict peace-building is not something that needs to be pursued exclusively in New York and around conference tables there; it needs to be practised in the field in each and every peace operation that is on the Commission's agenda. Without that replication of better focus and coordination in the field, the work of the Peace-building Commission could rapidly come to resemble that of a fifth wheel, spinning in a vacuum and achieving little.

And then, thirdly, the issue of resources will be vital. It has to be accepted that the Commission is not itself an executive body with its own financial resources. But, if better focus and Secretariat commitment is not matched by the allocation of the necessary resources by those member states and multilateral organisations that do have them, then, once again, little useful purpose will be served.

Fourth and lastly, I do think the issue of the prevention of state failure will need to be re-visited again. It is a bitter irony that some of those countries which most vociferously opposed a preventive mandate for the Peace-building Commission, are only too likely themselves to be carried into the intensive care ward of post-conflict peace-building. It really cannot be in the interests of the international community as a whole, nor of individual countries, that the UN's capacity for preventive action is so under-resourced and under-utilised.

So, as so often with the UN, the more you do, the more there remains to be done. Post-conflict peace-building is with us as a major focus of the organisation's work for the foreseeable future. We need to do our best to ensure that it is successful in that task.