

Security Council Open Debate on the Maintenance of International Peace and Security: War, its lessons, and the search for a permanent peace, 29th January 2014, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Quinlan, Permanent Mission of Australia to the United Nations

We thank Jordan for its boldness in convening today's debate on a topic that is challenging, indeed breathtaking, as you have said, Mr. President, for all Member States.

Conflict prevention is why the United Nations exists, but 69 years after the San Francisco Conference, we are still struggling every day "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". We witness the daily devastation in Syria, in South Sudan, in the Central African Republic and elsewhere, and the objective of peace seems as distant as ever.

In bringing us to today's debate, Mr. President, you have asked how our understanding of history can help prevent, rather than feed, further conflict, and how the Council itself can help to foster that understanding. Those are crucial questions for the Council as we work to prevent conflict between States and conflict within States.

To prevent conflict, we obviously must first understand what triggers and drives it, we must be able to recognize the warning signs, and we must recall the particular vulnerability of countries that have already experienced conflict. Between 1945 and 2009, more than half of all countries that suffered from civil war relapsed into conflict after its apparent end. Too often, history appears to be destiny.

National mechanisms are usually in the best position to establish what led to conflict and what happened during it. Truth and reconciliation commissions can provide an authoritative account of events that led to or occurred during conflict, and so serve as a crucial bulwark against those who might seek to use and abuse history in order to foment further conflict. The Security Council should provide strong support to those mechanisms, as it did in resolution 2100 (2013) in relation to Mali.

Other parts of the United Nations system, including the Department of Political Affairs, the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund, should similarly support and encourage truth and reconciliation processes. Accountability processes play an important role in helping to uncover the truth. Justice that is perceived to be legitimate can help a society move past the pain of its past by holding perpetrators to account and giving victims a voice. Criminal courts, whether national or international, can, through their findings, confer legitimacy on otherwise contestable facts, making it more difficult for societies to deny past wrongs.

There must be accountability for perpetrators of serious crimes, regardless of affiliation. Victors' justice is short-lived and ultimately destructive. One of the formative achievements of the United Nations has been the spread of universal rights as an accepted norm, the idea that we all have obligations regardless of our relative power over others. That is something that the Council must always continue to emphasize.

The Security Council should also make full use of the tools at its disposal, inherently imperfect though they are. Commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions established by the Council under Article 34 of the Charter have proven to be useful mechanisms. The Council's recent decision in adopting resolution 2127 (2013) to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate violations of international humanitarian law and human rights in the Central African Republic is an essential part of addressing that conflict.

Of course, other United Nations organs can also play a role. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, authorized by the Human Rights Council, has played a persuasive role in establishing the terrible facts of that conflict.

Regional organizations can also play a role. The African Union's recent decision to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate events surrounding the current conflict in South Sudan is an example. In our own region, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is working with the United Nations to document lessons learned through ASEAN's good offices, mediation and facilitation roles and is sharing experiences on the effective conduct of peace processes and negotiations. All of those tools can assist societies to understand events that led to and occurred during a conflict. Inclusive and transparent processes can help to ensure that different perspectives and grievances are heard and acknowledged, and so build a picture of the broad history of the conflict. Incorporating women's voices in those processes is fundamental. Nurturing open and receptive education is essential.

But we must be realistic about the prospects for ultimately arriving at a shared history. Often no single history of a conflict or single understanding of events will be achievable, or necessarily even be desirable. Differing interpretations of events are inevitable, but the facts about those events should be inescapable. We must make every effort to establish those facts and to record and document testimony. Then we should be able to ensure that the victors alone do not dictate the history. The United Nations has an instrumental role in that, one that can often be decisive. It is a role that we should embrace seriously in our work.

It is not enough simply to advocate reconciliation and shared historical understanding. Practical efforts must also be made to ensure that differences cannot be exploited to spark further conflict. Central to that endeavour is ensuring that a post-conflict society is able to effectively mediate differences and address grievances. That is where genuine, long-term peacebuilding comes in, with its emphasis on the rule of law, observance of human rights, access to effective judicial or other institutions and participatory democratic governance. The result will, hopefully, be institutional legitimacy and social cohesion. Ultimately, we seek to build inclusive societies where differences, whether ethnic, racial, religious, political or communal, are accommodated and State protection is extended to all individuals, and where recourse to violence and reversion to conflict is not only unacceptable, but unthinkable. Only then will countries that have been devastated by conflict be able to transcend their own histories.