

CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION FORUM

JUNE 12, 2001

Notes

Topic: *Africa's Inherited Borders: Source of Stability or Conflict?*

Speakers: Dr. I. William Zartman & Dr. Marina S. Ottaway

Professor William Zartman began by stating his premise that most political boundaries are artificial, and that the boundaries of African political entities are no more artificial than any others. Within this logic, it could be said that the U.S. has artificial borders between its constituent states. There is the point, however, that the African boundaries were imposed by outside interests rather than by the inhabitants of the area. However, those who raise the objection to these “artificial” boundaries do not customarily suggest how they could be made more natural, or who should be in charge of rectifying them. It is true that many of the borders contravene human or physical boundaries, but the alternatives do not usually prove any better. For example, expanding Rwanda to include Rwandans living outside Rwanda does not consider minority interests in the new Rwandan state. Furthermore, there are too many factors to make changing the boundaries satisfactory for all; a change to mollify one population could cause conflict with many others.

Zartman explained that there are three ways to change borders. First, there are agreements between the two bounded countries. An example is the 1963 agreement between Mali & Mauritania in which straight lines were drawn on the map, or by the administrative boundaries redrawn between Egypt and Sudan, to handle migratory populations.

The second and third methods are international conferences, such as the 1880 Council of Berlin which divided up Africa, and war. In order to minimize conflict, some countries have attempted to “Africanize” their boundaries and make them their own. This was voiced in the OAU’s 1964 Resolution of Cairo, which basically stated that the current boundaries should be considered permanent. At the time and ever since, the OAU has rejected Somalia’s irredentist demands saying, in effect, “you are where you are.”

Rather than endorsing a redrawing of African boundaries, Zartman suggested that the U.S. should urge the OAU to declare a year of demarcation to “tighten the skin that holds the bodies.” This could be the final step in legitimizing borders in Africa. He pointed out that ½ of the African boundaries are not marked on the ground. He also suggested that these demarcations should be done during peacetime, rather than in a conflict situation where the boundary can become yet another point of contention, as this would be wise conflict prevention. Finally, he recommended that boundary regimes be set up with rules and regulations for dealing with the human commerce

between states. He felt that a combination of demarcation and permeability of the boundaries would help to ease tensions in the area.

Zartman felt that further “Balkanization” of Africa was not constructive. “If borders are the problem, then changing them is not the solution”, he said. “Changing them is the best way to ensure conflict as it is a Pandora’s box.” It would legitimize everything by taking the boundary decision out of the state’s hands and suggest the idea that any group can become a “state”. What is more important is to foster a process of state & nation-building in order to foster a sense of identity and autonomy (where needed).

Dr. Marina Ottaway said she felt that it would be better to handle border issues on a case-by-case basis rather than proclaim a “year of demarcation”, especially when in some cases the boundaries enclose an entity which has ceased to function as a state. In Africa, there are a number of states/entities that we cannot assume can survive as a state. Insisting that a dysfunctional state remains a state is not a solution. She made plain that she is not arguing that the international community should take a functioning state and break it up.

She went on to present us with four case studies; two complete & two still unfolding. Her first case was that of Eritrea, whose 30-year war with Ethiopia ended when Eritrea became a separate country. Theoretically, an internal solution could have worked for self-determination for Eritrea within Ethiopia, but there was no political will, and so the situation was eventually “solved” by war and the subsequent agreement. Separation was not the ultimate solution because the two countries did go to war again, but peace will probably eventually prevail. Clear border demarcation following the previous conflict would have been important in precluding the recent conflict because the lack of clarity on the border played a big role in fuelling the conflict.

In the case of Somalia, state-building efforts orchestrated by the international community should have been effective, but there was, again, no political will to effect positive change over time. The intra-state conflict lessened when the international community stopped trying to force Somalia to function as a state. The ambiguous status quo is less dangerous than the state in which Somalia found itself ten years ago. Somalia doesn’t actually exist any more as a political entity; a situation which is difficult for the population, but an improvement over open warfare.

Dr. Ottaway stated that there is no real effort on the part of international actors to rebuild Sudan. It may be time, she said, to admit that there is no solution other than creating an internal border between north and south. Two Sudans may be inevitable as one cannot keep Sudan as one country and have peace.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, there is no clear separatist group. The Congolese state has never really existed, but has always been dysfunctional. The international community does not have

the will or the capacity to rebuild the DRC. While Dr. Ottaway did not advocate that the international community works towards partition, she said it is time to seriously consider what happens if attempts to keep a country together fail and, indeed, create conflict.

In the **Q&A and Discussion period** of the morning, a participant gave two examples of border conflict resolution. One case is that of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These states have a neutral zone between their respective jurisdictions. Another is Libya and Chad – two states that legally and judicially resolved their border dispute.

Professor Zartman stated that it is not possible to separate Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda in such a densely populated country. Rather, the solution can only come through right identification; when all Rwandans see themselves first as Rwandan. He went on to say that this identification, as well as nation-building in general, must happen from within, since it is not the job of the international community to build states – although outsiders can act as helpful conveners and supporters. “We do not make states like muffins.”

A participant asked the speakers what can be done about populations left behind after a partition. Dr. Ottaway responded that she was not arguing for partition to make borders more functional, but that partition should be considered in extreme cases of dysfunctional states, such as the DRC. Dr. Zartman replied by saying that moving populations to fit into “functional” states is ethnic cleansing. He said that a minority secession may lead to a state but that there is no guarantee that another minority will not want to secede later, potentially causing further violent conflict. Changing borders and moving populations can cause conflict, he said, so instead one should try to make states work.

Dr. Ottaway referred to her earlier point that there are cases in which outside powers must have a tolerance for ambiguous political arrangements when and where these arrangements keep the peace, such as in Somalia. Dr. Zartman responded that states do not always want ambiguity, and in fact desire to be considered a state, such as Kosovo. If partition were to be tried in the DRC, he argued, it would be unproductive because the armies have pulled back from the frontlines and are looking into options for dialogue. If the international community tried partition now, the armies would rekindle the war to shave off pieces for themselves before lines can be drawn.