

**Great Lakes Policy Forum
Special Meeting
June 18, 2002**

This forum was a special meeting organized to hear from Reverend Daniel Ntoni-Nzinga, Executive Secretary for the Inter-Ecclesiastical Committee for Peace in Angola, and Malik Chaka, Staff Member for the House Subcommittee on African Affairs. Their presentations and the ensuing discussion explored the regional dimensions to the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Recurring themes included the regionalization of national conflicts, the need for nations to address their problems domestically, and the potential power and demonstration effect of a successful peace processes within the Great Lakes region. Furthermore, the peace process in Angola and increasingly volatile situation in Zimbabwe were assessed in light of this regional dynamic.

Regionalization of Conflict

Regionalization can occur as a result of armed forces across borders, population movement and economic resource exploitation. Conflicts in the Great Lakes region are becoming increasingly regionalized in each of these areas. Armed forces in the Great Lakes region have not confined themselves to their own countries, choosing instead to move about freely across borders to fight wars in foreign lands. One can see it in Angola where members of the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups from Rwanda were among the soldiers who fought in the decades long Angolan war. It is also evident in the DRC where the Congolese did not fight in their protracted conflict, but instead forces from Zimbabwe, the Rwandan Patriotic Army, Uganda and Burundi carried out most of the fighting.

This phenomenon of regionalization has also expanded to include aspects of war other than armed forces. Conflict often brings with it the problem of refugees, and the conflicts in the Great Lakes are no exception. Hundreds of thousands of refugees from various conflict-ridden countries have spilled across their neighbors' borders. These refugees only further exacerbate the already unstable conditions in their host countries by increasing pressure on limited national resources, changing the dynamics of local economies, damaging surrounding environments, and frequently harboring rebel forces with the refugee camps.

The economic facet of the DRC conflict exposes further complexities to and causes of the regional dimensions of the violence. Resource rich Congo provides an increased incentive for neighboring countries to remain involved in the conflict. Looting has also been a regional problem with armies and violence being financially supported by the illegal exploitation of natural resources.

Localization vs. Regionalization of Peace Building Efforts

Regionalization also exists within peace processes, but many experts believe that this approach is doomed to fail. One panelist mentioned the role that Angola is playing in the

DRC: while Angolan soldiers fought to obtain peace and order in the DRC, violence continued in their own country. Angola is itself in need of peacekeeping and stabilization in its post-war period. A question was raised about how much the Angolan people know about their country's involvement in the DRC and the response was very little.

The answer then to this problem of regionalism complicating the causes of conflict and obscuring peace-building efforts in the Great Lakes, is that countries must first assess the internal causes of conflict within their own borders. Instead of trying to build peace for another country, they must first build peace within their own country. A country should not handle its refugees by going to the host country to deal with the problem there, but rather they should take a look at their own country to learn why their people are leaving so they can stop the problem before it starts. Countries must work proactively to stop problems from happening rather than working reactively to deal with their effects. Internalization has the power to turn regionalism from a destabilizing force into a peace-building tool. Experts believe that if countries work within themselves to solve their problems internally, then peace can be achieved in the region.

Many experts believe that the regionalism that is causing so much turmoil in the Great Lakes region could instead be used to generate peace by creating a demonstration effect. Angola, for example, is just beginning its own peace process. If successful, it could serve as an example to other countries in the region of how to begin creating a peaceful state. Some believe that the best hope for regional peace lies with the DRC. Conflict there is inextricably linked to the situation in neighboring countries and has fueled much regional tension due to the large number of foreign forces involved. These forces are not only creating conflict in the DRC, but they are also creating conflict in the region as a whole as a result of the thousands of refugees created and the looting of the Congo's plentiful natural resources. One panelist stated that if the DRC was a desert with no natural resources, the conflict would have ended years ago. If foreign hands could be removed from the DRC, and this huge country could somehow create peace within its borders, it would have an enormous demonstration effect on the rest of the region and could be the impetus needed to start a chain reaction of meaningful peace building in the Great Lakes region.

Zimbabwe

The discussion led to an analysis of how the ideas of regionalization and internalization of conflict can be related to the situation in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is a country not at war but most definitely not at peace either. The opposition believes it was robbed of victory in the elections and the government believes it won fair and square. Peace talks between the two groups facilitated by South Africa and Nigeria have broken down and the government will not return to them until the opposition accepts the results of the elections. In the meantime, repression by the government is on the rise and domination of civil society is notable. A meaningful judicial system has been destroyed and raids are being conducted on civilians. The government wishes to completely crush the opposition. In addition, Zimbabwe is dealing with a serious food shortage, which has the

potential to turn into an all out famine, and the “fast track” system has proven disastrous for the economy.

If Zimbabweans begin to flee their country as refugees, they will most likely end up in South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique or Zambia. None of these countries would be prepared to accept Zimbabwean refugees and could easily be destabilized by such a movement.

Once again, it is evident how regional this region’s conflicts are. Zimbabwe's problems are not just an issue for Zimbabwe, but are a problem for its neighbors as well. From an internal standpoint, it was suggested that Zimbabwe should work to further develop its already well-established civil society before the government can fully crush it. Non-violence might prove to be their best solution for bringing about change since mass demonstrations are often attacked and the demonstrators killed by the government. Some have already been studying ways to bring about change through non-violent means and their effort should be increased and supported.

One panelist suggested three solutions for reaching peace in Zimbabwe. First, Zimbabwe must bring its troops out of the DRC. Conflict abroad breeds conflict at home, and this cycle must not be allowed to continue in Zimbabwe. Secondly, the peace talks between MDC and ZanuPF need to continue. Many believe that South Africa should be the facilitator for these talks. Lastly, peace must be reached in the DRC. As noted before, peace in the DRC has the potential to bring peace to the entire region, including Zimbabwe.

Looking Ahead

There is no doubt that conflict and peace in the DRC is a regional issue. Up until now, it conflict has consumed the region, but the call has been made for peace to take center stage and bring the Great Lakes countries into a new era. Many believe that civil society is the key to future success with peace in the Great Lakes. If civil society can be strengthened then peace and stability could follow.

Furthermore, it was also emphasized that to create regional peace we must start counseling the perpetrators of conflict. Until now, all attention has been focused on the victims of the conflict, which does nothing to stop the conflict at its source. At this time, governments and non-governmental organizations are contemplating the idea of holding a regional conference to discuss ways of achieving peace and security for their countries. Such a gathering would be an influential first step towards widespread peace for the Great Lakes.