Our Common Peacebuilding Challenge: the Contribution of ‘International Geneva’
Tuesday, 6 November 2007

CONFERENCE SYNOPSIS

On 6 November 2007, the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) held a high-level conference that explored different perspectives on the achievements of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) one year after its creation, and the potential role of International Geneva in supporting its work.

The event was structured as a two-part dialogue. In the morning session, ‘New York talked to Geneva’ to present the PBC’s progress and identify future challenges. In the afternoon, ‘Geneva talked to New York’ in order to showcase International Geneva’s peacebuilding capacity and expertise. The overall objective was to elaborate on recommendations for the peacebuilding response of the PBC, and reflect on the added value of International Geneva in this process.

The conference brought together 15 panellists and more than 160 participants from United Nations bodies, regional organisations, government representatives, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academia. It was part of the GCSP project ‘The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission and International Geneva’, and built on UNOG initiatives for peacebuilding.

The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission: One year On

Keynote addresses were given by H.E. Mr. Yukio Takasu, Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations (UN) and Chair of the PBC, and Ms. Carolyn McAskie, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support.

Ambassador Takasu highlighted that, after the first year, the United Nations peacebuilding architecture, comprising the Peacebuilding Fund and Peacebuilding Support Office in addition to the Commission, was ‘fully in place’. Country-specific meetings on Burundi and Sierra Leone had been held and peacebuilding strategic frameworks had been agreed upon for these two countries. However, as expectations from the Commission were very high, this architecture must now be put to the test and shown to make a tangible difference in peacebuilding activities in post-conflict countries. The Ambassador noted that while it may be too early to make definitive judgements about the success of the PBC after just 12 months, it would be essential for the PBC to produce concrete results in Burundi and Sierra Leone and to put lessons learned into practice in the second year. It was also important that criteria or a list of factors be defined which would be taken into account when choosing new countries to be considered by the Commission.

Noting that “if peacebuilding is going to work, it must do so on a shared understanding of the problems, a shared commitment to work together to address them effectively, and a shared acknowledgement of the responsibility to remain engaged until the job is done”, Ms. McAskie also emphasised lessons learned. There was a growing recognition that the PBC and its supporting architecture existed because “we had not been getting post-conflict interventions right”. The past few months had also shown the importance of
strategic planning, as piecemeal initiatives seldom added up to sustainable peace. Financing for post conflict recovery was essential, particularly because many of the affected countries were the “aid orphans” or “forgotten crises”. While quick disbursement of funds after a cease-fire agreement could act as a catalytic tool for peacebuilding, the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) should not be mistaken for funds for long term peacebuilding,” Ms. McAskie stated. She said that donor agencies should “move out of their comfort zones and tackle non-traditional assistance” in order to facilitate the mobilization of resources for viable peacebuilding.

When speaking about the challenges ahead, Ambassador Takasu pointed out that the maintenance of political commitment to peacebuilding was essential. For this reason, the PBC needed to strengthen relationships with key stakeholders including United Nations principal organs, United Nations funds and programmes, regional and sub-regional organisations, international financial organisations and civil society. The Ambassador called on all present to support the work of the PBC by developing networks of peacebuilders, coordinating their activities with the Commission and providing skills enhancement opportunities for peacebuilding professionals.

Another priority for the second year would be the elaboration of guidance on policy and strategic issues such as security sector reform (SSR), democratic governance, the rule of law, job creation and the role of the private sector. Raising awareness of the PBC’s activities through an improved website would also be important. Ms. McAskie added that there was a need to better understand the definition, indicators for success and concepts behind peacebuilding. Ambassador Takasu concluded by pointing to the potential of the PBC to go beyond ‘forgotten conflicts’ and to contribute to broader human and global security concerns.

A panel discussion followed during which high-level representatives of Geneva-based United Nations entities, of regional organizations and of civil society presented their own view on the achievements of the PBC to date and on how their engagement with the Commission could be strengthened.

The Contribution of International Geneva

The afternoon session was led by ‘International Geneva’ peacebuilding actors, who addressed the contributions and capacities of Geneva-based actors. The findings of the joint GCSP-QUNO-PSIS project ‘The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission and International Geneva’, presented at the start of the session, showed that as the host of a wide variety of agencies and civil society organizations, ‘International Geneva’ had great potential to contribute to the work of the PBC.

The publication ‘A Platform for Peace’, presented for the first time at the conference, provided a succinct overview of the background, findings and future plans of the project. The mapping exercise carried out as part of the project was of particular interest, as nearly 70 institutions had taken part in the initiative, including international organisations, NGOs and think tanks. Detailed findings of the exercise could be consulted in the ‘International Geneva Peacebuilding Guide’, an online database providing a inventory of Geneva-based peacebuilding actors’ capacities, that was regularly updated and providing search functions by organization, country of engagement, peacebuilding sector and activity. The exercise underscored Geneva’s role as a knowledge platform in fields such as human rights, gender, humanitarian protection and assistance, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegression (DDR) and employment creation. At the same time, however, it depicted ‘International Geneva’ as a “collection of highly specialized peacebuilding niches”, lacking a peacebuilding forum that would bring together peacebuilding specialists. Many participants welcomed the mapping exercise as providing valuable information and analysis, and suggested that it be expanded to other major centres of peacebuilding activity.
Overall, the various presentations during the session highlighted the added value for the PBC of ‘International Geneva’, thanks to the capacity and expertise of its multitude of peacebuilding actors, as well as ‘International Geneva’s’ ability to foster stakeholder relations, strategic guidance, and monitoring through network creation, capacity building and research.

**Conference Conclusions**

Participants all agreed that the conference had strengthened understanding among representatives of New York and Geneva-based organizations involved in peacebuilding of their respective activities and challenges. Practical recommendations were made by participants with a view to bolster the international community’s peacebuilding response through the PBC. In particular, the conference highlighted the necessity of more regular exchanges on peacebuilding between Geneva and New York.

Such exchanges should complement and not duplicate existing peacebuilding activities. Involving ‘International Geneva’ and other United Nations cities in the activities of the PBC should prevent the creation of additional layers of decision-making and bureaucracy, and focus on the specific value added for the delivery of assistance to countries undergoing a peacebuilding process. Links between ‘International Geneva’ and New York could be fostered in a number of ways, including by:

- Holding a Geneva stakeholder meeting in 2008 to develop a better understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of peacebuilding;
- Holding a Civil Society Forum during the annual meeting of the Economic and Social Commission (ECOSOC) to incorporate the views of civil society into the workings of the PBC;
- Establishing a PBSO liaison office in Geneva;
- Rotating sessions of the PBC between New York and Geneva;
- Establishing Geneva as a ‘sounding board’ for operational and strategic ideas as well as a ‘harvesting ground’ for lessons learned from field operations.