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The Peacebuilding Commission: a Year in Review An Interview with Assistant Secretary-General Carolyn McAskie

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The Center for UN Reform interviewed Assistant Secretary-General Carolyn McAskie, head of the Peacebuilding Support Office, on the work of the Peacebuilding Commission, the UN's new advisory body on peacebuilding, which has been in operation now for almost a year. The interview offers an assessment of the efforts of the Commission to date, and an overview of some of the challenges lying ahead.

Asked for the rationale behind establishing a Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) as an advisory body on peacebuilding within the UN system, Carolyn McAskie had a simple but telling answer: "...we were not getting it right for countries in the post conflict period," she said, thus acknowledging a long history of countries returning to conflict after a peace settlement and requiring the re-deployment of UN Peacekeeping troops for extended periods. "My sense is that the Peacebuilding Commission has been doing rather well," she adds when asked to provide an evaluation of the work of the PBC since its formal establishment in December 2005. She points out that the Commission officially began its work on 23 June 2006 and while initially its members were largely focused on procedural matters, "once they started looking at Burundi and Sierra Leone and engaging the two countries, the whole tone of the discussions and the atmosphere changed 180 degrees. All members of the Commission were engaged on the issues of peacebuilding."

During the first few months, Commission members focused on examining the issues and establishing some of the peacebuilding priorities. Currently, the PBC is concentrating on its core mandate: bringing together all relevant actors to marshal resources and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery.¹ This process involves the whole UN system, she adds.

Exploring this further, with respect to the goal of bringing together all relevant actors to work towards facilitating peaceful transformations from violence, I ask her whether there have been any steps taken to increase the level of cooperation between such UN organs as the Security Council, the GA, and ECOSOC with the Peacebuilding Commission to increase its effectiveness. She explains that the relationship of the PBC with the Security Council and the General Assembly "is formalized. The SC has referred Burundi and Sierra Leone to the Commission for advice. Also, the various resolutions creating the Commission require it to submit an annual report to the GA and to the SC." The issue of a formal relationship with ECOSOC, however, is something that has not been pinned down. Member States have considered it from time to time, but they have not considered steps to formalize it. "My assumption" she continues, "is that when we sit down over the next few weeks, to start working on the draft of the report to the two bodies, that issue will surface again and members of the Commission will want to address it." However, it is not yet clear what form it will take.

Within the context of keeping the countries on track, another vital task for the Commission at the moment is making paragraph 2(c) of the resolution that created the PBC,² operational, particularly the following section: "extending the period of attention given by the international community to post-conflict recovery," as it is evident that many of the countries that fall in the category of the "forgotten crisis" return to conflict. It is therefore crucial to sustain the political support for these countries in order to help them stay on track and to provide them with the resources to address the challenges of any post-conflict situation.

The First Cases: Burundi and Sierra Leone

The first two countries selected to begin the work of the PBC, Burundi and Sierra Leone, were referred to the Commission by the Security Council at their own request. "This is a very important aspect of the work of the

Commission” McAskie explained. “The Commission does not call countries up before it. It does not say we will be looking at you and you and you. The country has to want to do it. It has to be a two-way engagement.” She adds that how the country owns a process is *a sine qua non* of the success of peacebuilding.

In regard to Burundi and Sierra Leone, the UN has benefited greatly from the integrated UN missions on the ground, which have taken responsibility for the preparatory work. In their case, “the job of the Commission and of the Office has been that of engaging all the partners; bringing the operational departments and the operational agencies to work together on the strategic approach which will help to guide them in their operational actions on the ground to address the critical issues, which we can identify as being key to keeping countries on track,” she said. In a nutshell, that is what the strategic approach for the Peacebuilding Commission is going to be, she explained. Thus, aside from the already existing strategies, such as the PRSP (poverty reduction strategy papers) for example, the task of the Commission will be that of identifying a “half a dozen or so issues that, if not addressed, could put the country in danger. That is going to be very critical over the next few weeks. We have given ourselves the deadline of June, the PBC’s first anniversary. We expect to have the Burundi strategy approved by then. The Sierra Leone strategy will be drafted but will not be approved until September because there is an election coming up and it will be up to the new government to endorse it.” Although the strategy for Sierra Leone will not be approved until September, it will be discussed in the PBC before September, she adds.

Main Challenges

“Peacebuilding defies any specific definition,” she explains “and the one thing we are resisting is any attempt to see it as the next step on the ladder. Peacebuilding is rather the whole ladder, from conflict to peace, to sustainable peace.” Peacebuilding should not necessarily be looked at “as an automatic peacekeeping-peacebuilding approach. In fact, peacebuilding can start much earlier or much later on. The whole concept that we are working on now revolves around the fact that one has to consider the roots of the conflict and look at the peacemaking process and at what aspects will enhance the work of peacebuilding.” In this respect, “the civilian aspects of peacekeeping,” she continues “are very clearly linked to peacebuilding, they are in fact peacebuilding. Peacekeeping itself is a key aspect of consolidating peace.”

One of the big challenges for the Commission, McAskie explains, will be to determine when a country no longer requires a formal peacebuilding process. “We have to come to some kind of determination or judgment, and the reasons for that would be different depending on the country.” Currently, there is no system or formula for measuring sustainable peace, but the concept of an ‘exit strategy’ has often surfaced during discussions. Nevertheless, McAskie believes that when establishing a peacebuilding process, the Peacebuilding Commission should approach a country primarily with engagement, rather than an exit strategy, in mind.

In the longer term, “once the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) and the Commission will get more up to speed,” she explains, “we will also need to start looking at the question why do states fail - because how can you help them not to fail if you do not understand why they fail - and what are the dangers for these countries of falling back into conflict. This is what the best practices and lessons learned are all about, to draw from the experience some universal and specific tools which can be applied not just to the countries that the PBC is dealing with but to broader post conflict situations in general. I place enormous importance on the role of the PBSO in the broader peacebuilding domain. If we are restricted to only working on those countries that are under consideration of the Commission then we will not be giving it the value added of its work being applied across the spectrum. For the Commission, I think it is terribly important that they feel that the work they do on a few cases will have broad implications for peacebuilding and for the United Nations.”

“The development link to peacebuilding is also very important,” she explains, “to the G77 members of the Commission but also to the western countries because, as any practitioner knows very well, one of the reasons these countries fail is that they are often ‘aid orphans.’ They may have two or three faithful donors but do not have the 25 donors that their neighbors have. Thus, resources for development are a very important issue for these countries. But that has to be juxtaposed with keeping them on track politically as well. You can have the most beautiful reconstruction program, but if you run into serious political problems, it can all be offset...we need to get the balance right.” She adds, “Therefore the SC has to be engaged, as the GA will be. But the GA is a very large body and we should keep in mind that it is difficult for it to engage in practical change, which is why I believe ECOSOC, as responsible for economic and social issues, could be involved.”

The Peacebuilding Support Office

The Peacebuilding Support Office was created on the basis of the recommendation contained in the World Summit Outcome Document in 2005 that the SG establish “a small peacebuilding support office staffed by qualified experts

to assist and support the Peacebuilding Commission,” within the Secretariat and confirmed in the PBC founding resolutions, 60/180 and SCR 1645.

I asked ASG McAskie, who has been at the head of the office since its establishment, what difficulties she has encountered in launching the office, what her team has accomplished to date and what tasks are to be tackled immediately ahead. She explains that one challenge for the PBSO was related to the fact that its creation missed the last budget cycle. Thus, “governments agreed that the Secretary General could reallocate some funds internally, obtain secondments, etc... for us to create a beginning of a structure. What we have done now is develop a budget proposal, which will go to Member States this summer for the 2008-2009 budget. It is much harder to hire people if you cannot guarantee them a permanent job. So, it was a much slower process than I thought it would be, but by January we were very solid. We are now up to about 15 people, including support staff.”

She also adds that part of the difficulty of having a two year budget cycle, is having to plan three years ahead not knowing what the future workload of the office will be like. “Right now we are catching up with the workload,” she explains, “but we need to determine how much of our workload is related to set-up, and how much is instead related to the ongoing work. Once the Commission is running and has a regular program of work, we will also understand how much of its workload will be affected by the addition of new countries.” In fact, the responsibilities of the Peacebuilding Support Office depend very much on how many additional countries will request to be referred to the Peacebuilding Commission for advice. “What if no other countries ask? And what if six ask? Do we stack them up like planes over La Guardia and say we will take two now, two in January and two in June?” she wonders.

“An ideal scenario,” she confides, “would be that we could add maybe a couple of countries every year.” Also, thinking in terms of the PBC’s responsibility to ensure sustained attention, one has to consider that countries could be on the agenda of the Commission for up to five years. Then, “we would need to look at what that means in terms of workload. My current impression, and only time will tell whether or not we were to work this way, is that there could be a first period of six to twelve months of very intensive engagement with the country. This would be very labor intensive for the Commission, and for the country committees, which would meet regularly. The field would be very engaged, our office would be involved, the partners, departments and agencies would be very engaged.”

“But once you have the strategic framework in place then you would be looking at a monitoring-type role, and the engagement with the country would be on the basis of regular reviews or engagement in response to any crisis.” For example, “say there was a political crisis or that the country was in danger of returning to conflict. Then the Commission has to re-engage and involve the Security Council, as appropriate. There might be again a flurry of activity. What if there was a donor roundtable and 12 months later few of the pledges have been paid and the country was short on resources?” The Commission would also want to play a role in that case. However, except in critical cases, during the monitoring period, the country committees may not meet too regularly. And in a situation in which a couple of countries are added every year, “by the time you are up to 6 or 8 countries, if you had two countries in their initial phase and you were monitoring another six, that could be a great deal of work. So the issue of whether or not we would have sufficient staff is a question that only time will tell. We have to project right through to 2010.”

When I ask her which countries are likely to be added to the Commission’s agenda, she replies that “there have been a few nibbles” but nothing certain to date. She is reluctant to mention any potential country that could be referred to the Commission, as this is a political issue to be determined by the countries and the PBC. “However,” she adds, “the UN can start thinking about potential countries.³ These would not necessarily be countries where peacekeeping missions are already present. In fact, it would be useful to have a mix of countries that have and have not had peacekeeping missions in acknowledgement that peacebuilding is not an automatic peacekeeping-peacebuilding approach.”

Since a crucial task of the PBSO is providing policy and analysis support to the PBC, I asked Ms. McAskie what has been done so far to carry out this task in terms of reviewing the best practices in peacebuilding; developing and managing a knowledge network on peacebuilding within the organization; and providing sound analysis and information in support of the PBC’s work. She explains that “the policy side was one of the last to be staffed so we have not yet developed a full agenda on that, but we have made an interesting start.” First of all, the Commission established a working group on ‘lessons learned’ which is doing some interesting thematic work. “We also are engaged with some institutions that are very anxious to support the work of the Peacebuilding Commission,” she continues, “such as the International Peace Academy (IPA), and the Center on International Cooperation at NYU. These institutions have been cooperating in supporting us through seminars. We had a seminar on peacebuilding

strategies actively involving the Commission members. We are engaging at a very practical level right now because I believe very strongly that this Commission should be as knowledge-based as possible.”

“If you look at the membership of the Commission, a lot of Member States have small missions at the UN.” In fact, she explains that while it is easy for some of the bigger delegations to send their experts on transitional justice, smaller delegations often do not have that possibility. “The level of some of the questions” she adds, “made me realize that there is a tremendous amount of information that we can provide to help Commission members become knowledgeable. That is a major goal of the PBSO. Thus, we will need to have a process whereby we help new members get up to speed...To this end, we want to give them as many opportunities to be engaged in the discussion. For example, we brought in the World Bank and UNDP to talk about the poverty reduction strategy papers and post conflict needs assessments.”

A Role for Civil Society?

When I ask her to what extent civil society is engaged in the work of the Peacebuilding Commission, both in New York and in the field, Ms. McAskie replies that civil society engagement varies because the Peacebuilding Commission resolutions were not sufficiently clear in that regard. The ambiguity in the resolutions is due to the fact that there are substantial differences of opinions amongst Member States as to the level of engagement of civil society there should be at both headquarters and ground level. “We hope to see greater engagement of civil society in the actual work of the Commission in New York, which so far that has been on an *ad hoc* basis.” PBC members are working on a policy. In the field, she explains that members of the Commission agree that civil society is a fundamental part of the process, “So I am encouraged,” she says. “Amongst other initiatives, there is a process on the ground in both Sierra Leone and Burundi for approving the programs under the peacebuilding fund and for preparing the strategic work of the commission involving steering committees on the ground made up of the government, the UN, bilateral and other multilateral donors and civil society.”

However, she also notes that while “we can use the peacebuilding process on the ground both in Burundi and in Sierra Leone, to further enhance, advance and encourage the relationship between civil society and the government...We also need to recognize that in the West it is only in the last generation that civil society has been directly engaged with governments...It is only recently that western governments have recognized that democracy happens every day, in the press, in civil society, and that getting elected is only the first step of an ongoing democratic process...We expect things from new governments overnight that other countries took 30-40 years to develop...Thus, my approach to this is to encourage the progress at all points.” Looking at the current examples, “Burundian civil society and their relationship with the authority is one that I would say is still young but is rapidly maturing. In Burundi there was not much in the way of civil society before the war,” she explains. “Civil society is therefore quite a new thing not only for the Burundian government, but also for Burundian civil society itself.”

In Sierra Leone, the situation appears to be slightly different as civil society there has been “more active, more entrenched and played a greater role in the response to suffering during the war years.” A new government will be elected in the second half of 2007 and civil society will have to cultivate a positive working relationship with the new government, she points out.

As the interview draws to a close, Ms. McAskie notes that there is one issue which has caused some confusion and which she would like to clarify. “Within the peacebuilding architecture,” she explains, “the third pillar is the Peacebuilding Fund, which is under the authority of the Secretary-General. There was some degree of confusion between the Commission and the Fund in the early days. While the Commission is focused on specific countries, the Fund is available to any kind of post-conflict situation, not just to countries before the Commission.”

Conclusion

The world has a lot riding on the success of the Peacekeeping Commission. The number of UN peacekeeping missions has been growing every year, and the cost is now at a new all time high. But far worse is the cost in lives of continued conflict in many troubled areas of the world. Given the importance of the Peacebuilding Commission’s mandate, the Center for UN Reform Education will continue to monitor its progress.

¹ A/RES/60/180, Par. 2(a).

² Amongst the main purposes of the Peacebuilding Commission there is that of providing “recommendation and information to improve the coordination of all relevant actors within and outside the UN, to develop best practices, to help to ensure predictable financing for early recovery activities and to extend the period of attention given by the international community to post-conflict recovery.” A/RES/60/180, Par. 2c.

³ In January, Security Council Report signaled Timor-Leste, Haiti, Republic of Congo and Guinea Bissau as potential countries being considered, [available at: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/site/c.glKWLeMTIsG/b.2449153/k.A04B/Update_Report_No_5brPeacebuilding_Commissionbr25_January_2007.htm].

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