



Commonwealth Secretariat

Briefing Note – Peace and Conflict

The challenge

It is better to prevent rather than react to the emergence of conflict. To prevent conflict, peaceful solutions must be sustainable and address any underlying causes of tension. They should also be agreed upon with the full co-operation and commitment of local actors.

The overall peace and conflict challenge is immense. Commonwealth countries with active conflict situations, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme, include Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Uganda. A number of other countries are directly affected by political tensions and challenges to democracy, peace and stability.

The Commonwealth Secretariat works with Commonwealth member states to improve the political atmosphere when conflict or tensions emerge. The Secretary-General can engage his ‘good offices’ to help defuse the situation, with the agreement of parties in the member state concerned.

The Secretariat undertakes such action to contribute to local and international initiatives to prevent or mitigate conflict, and to strengthen member countries’ ability to uphold the Commonwealth’s fundamental values. The good offices role can be used to stave off further deterioration, or as part of efforts to restore political stability and constitutional democracy.

The Commonwealth strategy

We seek to ensure that our programme activities remain flexible and responsive to changing circumstances in member states in which we are engaged. Where appropriate, they can include collaborative activities with bilateral and multilateral organisations. Our approach can be through direct engagement in Commonwealth countries and generally through technical assistance and policy advice. Over the longer term, the Commonwealth seeks to encourage a positive environment that can enable democracy and development to flourish.

Key principles

The Secretariat’s objective is to prevent and resolve conflict, while also strengthening the ability of member states to promote our fundamental values. These Commonwealth values, laid down in the 1971 Declaration of Commonwealth Principles and the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration, include equal rights, independence of the judiciary, freedom of expression, and just and honest government.

Our good offices work in Commonwealth countries always follows an invitation from a

member government. At their meeting in Australia in 2002, Commonwealth Heads of Government agreed on a general procedure to deal with situations where a complete derogation of democracy and constitutional rule by military intervention or otherwise had not occurred, but where serious or persistent violations of the Harare Principles had taken place.

Where a member government or the Commonwealth Chairperson-in-Office is concerned that such a situation has arisen, or may be about to arise, these concerns are generally brought to the attention of the Secretary-General highlighting if action may be required. The Secretary-General would then share any such concerns with the country in which problems have been reported, and allow the government an opportunity to respond to the issues raised.

Should the Secretary-General decide it necessary, he or she would then apply his/her good offices, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Chairperson-in-Office, where warranted, to encourage the country concerned to return to full compliance with the Harare Principles. If such good offices engagement does not resolve the dispute, then the situation in question may be referred to the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG).

The practical response

The Secretariat's Good Offices Section helps identify early warning indicators for conflict, looks at ways in which conflict and its symptoms can be prevented, and works with government and other important local actors to promote political dialogue to reduce tensions and create solutions.

The Good Offices Section also co-ordinates the approach of the Secretariat to conflict prevention, resolution and post-conflict peace-building. It ensures that all good offices engagements address issues of sustainable development, gender equality, human rights and good governance.

These engagements are undertaken at the request of the member state concerned and where there is broad support for such engagement. They aim to contribute to local and international initiatives to prevent or resolve conflict, and strengthen member states' ability to uphold the Commonwealth's fundamental values. Good offices activities are often led by a Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, with the support of Secretariat officers.

Peace and conflict highlights

AFRICA

Cameroon

Sustained Commonwealth engagement has resulted in the establishment of the first independent election management body. We also continue to support the development of the justice and penal sectors.

The Gambia

Our engagement has led to the development of a Commonwealth-guaranteed Memorandum of Understanding and Code of Conduct as a basis for co-operation between political parties. We have worked to strengthen democratic processes and institutions, including the judiciary, by providing judges and prosecutors.

Kenya

The Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group which reported on the disputed December 2007 general elections, a former African President, played an important role in the days following the poll by meeting all political leaders and advocating dialogue and restraint.

We are also working with the Government of Kenya, the African Union and the United Nations Development Programme in Kenya to strengthen governance institutions.

Lesotho

We continue to provide support to the Southern African Development Community (SADC), as well as to local political and civil society leaders, in efforts to encourage political reconciliation for long-term development.

Swaziland

We played a key role in the introduction of a national constitution. Our work continues, focusing on the implementation of the new constitution, and working to deepen and broaden democracy in the country.

Zanzibar (United Republic of Tanzania)

The Commonwealth worked with the government in facilitating the implementation of the peace agreement (Mwafaka) between the governing party and the opposition. The Commonwealth remains the moral guarantor of that agreement.

ASIA

Maldives

The Commonwealth supported the reform process and introduction of multiparty democracy. This resulted in a new progressive constitution that reflects Commonwealth fundamental principles. We observed the first multiparty, multi-candidate presidential election which saw a historic transfer of power. The Commonwealth continues to support the new government in consolidating and implementing the democratic reform process.

CARIBBEAN

Guyana

We provided expert assistance to the Electoral Commission and Parliament, and supported national programmes and activities promoting reconciliation and conflict prevention. Our sustained engagement has helped create a more stable environment which enabled violence-free elections.

PACIFIC

Fiji Islands

Further to Fiji Islands' suspension from the Councils of the Commonwealth in December 2006, the Commonwealth was engaged with the Interim Government and other parties, in collaboration with the United Nations, to encourage and support a broad-based and inclusive political dialogue. Fiji was fully suspended from the Commonwealth in September 2009.

The Commonwealth continues to work in co-operation with national and international partners to support and promote the full restoration of constitutional democracy,

sustainable peace and stability, and the holding of credible elections.

Tonga

The Special Envoy of the Secretary-General facilitated political dialogue between the government, nobles and people's representatives. We continue to encourage the political reform process now being taken forward in the Parliament.

Other Commonwealth players and their work

We work with the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), sharing information and co-operatively developing engagements where appropriate.

Co-operation with other international, regional and national bodies

Our good offices work aims to help communities, governments and regions affected by conflict. National non-governmental bodies that we work with are mainly civil society groups, including human rights institutions (for example, the Human Rights Commission for Cameroon) and national NGOs. We also work closely with a number of governmental and international organisations including the United Nations, the African Union, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the European Union, and the Pacific Islands Forum, as well as member-country high commissions. For instance, in Fiji Islands we work with the Pacific Islands Forum, the EU and the UN to support Fiji in returning to full democracy, while in The Gambia we work with the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the UN and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on judiciary and penal reforms.